The SMOKING FLAX

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The Smoking Flax
The Cow Puncher
The Homesteaders
Neighbours
Dennison Grant

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CHAPTER ONE

LONG vistas of undulating prairies checkered in black, moist fields. Here and there a grove of green poplars; here and there a farmhouse, white and peaceful in their shadows. Grass, green and moist, with a purple carpeting of anemones. Water shining from many tiny lakes. Coveys of white clouds, like ruffled swans, afloat in an infinite sky.

A long road, running straight on forever. Up and down the sweeping vistas of prairie-land; by the checkered black fields breathing deep the still sunshine of early May; through an interminable lane bordered with barbed wire fences. A gopher by the roadside, bolt upright and whistling. Fresh, damp earth from a badger hole mounded on the trail. The hum of telephone wires. Water gurgling through a culvert. A crow silent upon a neighboring post.

Over the ridge to the eastward an atom suddenly appears where the road leaps out of the sky. It grows rapidly, flashing a heliograph in the sunlight as it approaches. Presently it defines itself as that most familiar of all objects on the prairie trail, ouster of horse and saddle and buckboard and prairie schooner—a Ford automobile. Another hundred yards and it proclaims itself an old Ford automobile, sagging and rumbling and flapping its fenders like a spaniel's ears.

A man and a boy occupy the front seat, the man

at the steering wheel. The boy is of not more than eight or nine years, and his keen little face, upturned to his companion, is flushed with interest and childish enthusiasm. The two are deep in discussion, and, as we are to travel with them through the pages of this narrative, let us stop them here and climb aboard.

"No, I wouldn't exactly say there was a feud between the oak and the elm; it wasn't quite so bad as that—"

"What is a feud, Daddy X?"

"Why, a feud is when one family feels aggrieved with another and—"

"What is aggrieved, Daddy X?"

"That is when you think someone has been unfair —hasn't been a good sport, you know. Like the man who wouldn't pull us out of the mud-hole yesterday until I gave him a dollar."

"Was that a feud?"

"No, but for a moment it threatened to be," and the driver's lips disclosed a glint of white teeth. "You see, that happened to be our last dollar, and one always feels a sentimental attachment for his last dollar quite different from—"

"What is a sen-ti-mental 'tachment, Daddy X?"

"Something you will not begin to understand until you are about fourteen or fifteen, and will not have finished understanding when you are an old man, like me, at twenty-six. Now—where were we? Oh, yes! At the quarrel between the oak and the elm. As I was saying—"

Bump! The dog's ear fenders flapped against the wheels.

"Whoa, Ante! Watch your step! Mustn't hit a culvert like that!"

The child's voice was raised in sturdy protest. "You

promised, yesterday, Daddy X; don't you remember?"

"What did I promise, Reed? It slips me."

"Don't you remember? When we were stuck in the mud you took the wheel in both hands and you said, 'Ante, get us out of this and I will be more respectful to you, and I won't ask you to wade in the mud, and I'll call you by your full name, always—"Antelope",' like that."

"Dear me, so I did! But then, she didn't get us out of the mud, did she? We had to have a farmer haul us with his team, at the price of our last dollar—"

"It was a promise, and we got out," said the boy, solidly.

They were bowling along and had just crested the next hill. Suddenly the shining surface of the lake broke upon their vision.

"Whoa, Ante-*lope!*" and the driver brought his car to a stop.

For a full minute the two companions gazed in silence at the scene outspread before them. The prairie levels broke abruptly into a deep valley, blazoned on its higher slopes with vivid patches of light green poplars and balm-o'-gileads; on its lower reaches with the darker hues of stately elms. Between the broad banks, and filling all the bed of the valley, lay the lake, its surface shining like a mirror of quicksilver.

"This must be the lake shown on our map," said Calvin Beach. "See, there, at the western end, is the deep green of the marshes. Beyond those marshes, according to the map, the road swings across the valley, and there is a bridge over the river that feeds the lake."

"And we are to camp there to-night, aren't we, Daddy X?"

"That is the intention, if Ante-*lope* only continues faithful to the end."

Along the crest of the northern shore of the lake they skirted, the boy silent in wonder at the great cloud reflections floating far below, the driver busy with his car and with thoughts which, even in this peaceful setting, may have had in them something of cloud and shadow, too. The shades of evening trailed farther and farther behind; the sunlight blazed more squarely in their faces; the road unwound itself like an endless belt beneath their flying wheels.

At length they began to drop down a steep and winding road into the valley, and the car demanded the undivided attention of the man at the wheel. Reed had come to know such moments by instinct, and noted in silence how, on the steep pitches, the brake-bands gripped and the gravel flew from the tires as the wheels dragged on the stony road. But it always was a delightful experience, and the steeper the hill the more he liked it. He had a child's faith, unmeasured and immeasurable, in "Daddy X."

Presently they reached the valley levels. Cal released the brakes and the car floated forward with its pent-up momentum. Here they turned to the south, and a tall shadow-car, with funny oval wheels and a very top-heavy body, glided silently on their left until they plunged into a grove of ancient elms.

"Oh, Daddy X!" the boy cried, clapping his hands. "We've won! See, it was racing Ante—Ante-*lope*, and watching us instead of the road, and it ran right into the elms!"

"A driver always should watch the road," said Cal.

"Yes," the boy agreed. "There might be a high culvert."

The young man made a feint of having received

a blow in a vital part of his anatomy. "That's one to you, Reed," he admitted. "But watch out—"

For what he was to watch Cal did not say, and the boy did not ask. He had become engrossed in the bars of yellow sunlight which, streaming through aisles between the trees, flicked his face in rapid succession of light and shadow. "It's like that funny band you used to wear on your hat," he explained to Daddy X.

Suddenly the winding road, as though by a wiggle of its great backbone, straightened out before them. It led along a well-graded turnpike to the yawning arches of a steel bridge, but off to the side, almost buried in a growth of grass and infant poplars, a side trail led down to an old ford where the settlers had braved the river for a score of years before the building of the bridge.

"This should be a good place to camp; what say you, Ante-*lope?*"

Cal bounced up and down in his seat until the car nodded her nose. "'Very good,' you say. A fellow feeling, I suppose; Ford for ford. Well, we'll turn down here," and he guided it along the deserted trail. Down by the river there widened out a gravelly shelf. Against its pebbly shore the blue-brown water of the stream confided strange things whisperingly on its way to the marshes and the lake.

They climbed out and stretched their limbs. "To the big stump and back!" Reed suddenly challenged and was off like the wind, while his companion dallied for a moment to make a race of it at the finish. Panting, they came up together, but it was the boy's hand that touched the dog-eared fender first.

Reed brought the "grub box" out of the car as Cal started a fire with a few twigs on the gravel. Presently sausages were sizzling in the frying-pan and the

smell of steaming tea went up like sweet incense from their little altar. A hot sausage, split and laid between two stout slabs of bread, and supper was served.

When they had put away the remnants of their meal and scoured their utensils in the sand, the boy stood down by the water and skipped stones across the stream. He amused himself at this until the yellow bars of light faded out between the trees and the reflection of the steel bridge died in the darkness. Once or twice the sharp whistle of a wild duck's flight broke upon his ear, and his quick eye located the speedy traveller just as he faded into the grey of heaven; once a muskrat ventured forth from the opposite bank and dived, silent and graceful, at the challenge of Reed's stone; once a team and wagon rumbled over the bridge; otherwise all was silence save the low murmur of the water and the skip and chuckle of the stones which he threw upon it.

"All right, Reed," said a voice behind him. "Almost time to turn in."

"Oh, aren't we to have a fire and a story, Daddy X?"

"The fire is ready for starting, and the story, too, I think," said Cal. "What shall it be?"

"The few, the few—what was it, between the oak and the elm?"

"I didn't say it was quite a feud, did I? Well, let us start a fire, and then we shall hear."

Cal gathered some branches into a little heap, and now, kneeling beside the pile, he struck a match. The glow lit up his face, very brown and friendly in its ruddy light; a moment more and the dry limbs were writhing as the flame curled about their knotted wrists and fingers. Reed and Cal rolled an old tree trunk near to the fire and sat down together.

"The quarrel between the oak and the elm was over

the spruce," Cal began. "Both the oak and the elm were in love with the beautiful spruce. The oak wooed her in midday, when the sun poured its hot brilliance through the still boughs and wove on the grass beneath a carpet of light and shadow. It was then the oak would lean gently toward his evergreen companion and whisper in her ear, 'Spruce, I love you, dear,' but the spruce—"

"Oh, Daddy X, you are making poetry! You said, 'Whisper in her ear, Spruce, I love you, dear'—"

"Well, well, so I did! But poetry is the language of love, and no doubt the oak made poetry with the gentle rustle of his leaves in the sunlight. But the spruce only bowed her head, bashfully.

"In the evening the elm, which also stood near the spruce, would tremble toward her and say, 'Look at me, Spruce! Am I not beautiful? See my straight trunk; see my shapely limbs! See how all my branches reach to the same height and make a green umbrella in the sky. Think of that when you are tempted to look upon the knotty, knarled, twisted oak. Will you not come under that umbrella, dear Spruce, and let me shelter you when the winds blow and the snow falls and the world is white and still in the cold grip of winter?' But the spruce only bowed her head, bashfully.

"Then the oak said, gruffly: 'Elm, why do you make love to Spruce? She has been my companion since childhood. I have watched her grow from a tiny Christmas-tree to a beautiful maiden with lovely symmetrical green arms that stretch toward me, and with green hair that trembles in the wind, but never grows ruffled or fuzzy and never falls to the ground like yours and mine. Spruce belongs to me, I tell you,' said the oak, gruffly. 'Leave her alone.'

"Then the elm answered in his big, sighing voice, which came down from among his stately limbs, 'Oak, you shall not interfere in my love for Spruce. It is I who have grown beside her all these years; it is I who have pointed her skyward while you were tempting her down to the musty earth. Leave her to me.'

"But the oak said gruffly, 'She is mine, I tell you. I will not leave her to you!'

"Then the great elm shouted down, 'Now, Oak, I will have your sap for this! When the northwest wind blows I will fall upon you, and crush you into the earth, and everyone who passes shall laugh and say, "Look what Elm has done to Oak!" '

"Then the beautiful spruce, when she heard these loud and angry words, trembled silently, and tears came to her many eyes and fell like dew on the warm grass, for she loved both the oak and the elm, and could not have told you which she loved the better. And as the spruce trembled and wept she made a great resolve.

"And when the night was deep upon them she arose from the rich black earth which had been her home since she was a little Christmas-tree and stole silently away to a sandy ridge, where no other tree could grow, because she could not bear to hear her friends quarreling about her. And in the morning when the oak and the elm awoke they saw their beautiful love away on the ridge, where neither of them could grow at all. And there she has lived for ever since."

"And did the elm fight the oak, Daddy X?" the lad inquired, raising his gaze from the fire to the face of his friend.

"Oh, no! The elm was so sorry for his high words that he, too, departed, but he went to the valley, not far from the river. And so the oak and elm live apart,

but under their gruff surfaces they are very, very sad."

"But very beautiful," said the boy.

Reed poked the fire with a stick and watched a slender tongue of flame whipping the smoke upwards. The bedtime story was always to him a season of delight, a ten-minute ramble into fairyland. And this strange friend of his, whom he knew only as Daddy X, always had a new story every night, and never needed to read it out of a book. What a wonderful Daddy X he was!

"Now you must say your verse and go to bed," said Cal, after they had watched the fire smoulder for a while.

The lad clasped his hands, and, raising his face to the bright stars, repeated solemnly the words, "A bruiséd reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench."

"That was what my mother said, last, wasn't it, Daddy X?" said the boy.

"Yes, Reed."

"And that is why you called me Reed, because my mother was a bruiséd reed, isn't it, Daddy X?"

"Yes, lad. But you cannot understand. Some day, perhaps, you will understand." But under his breath he renewed the promise given to the boy's dead mother: "He never shall; he never shall!"

CHAPTER TWO

REED slipped silently from the knee-pants and shirt which were his principal attire; his shoes and stockings had been discarded early in the evening, when he went to throw stones in the water. For a moment the glint of his trim young body shone ruddy in the light of the fire; then, with a contortion, it disappeared within the folds of his nightgown.

"Porter, am dah berfs made up?" he demanded.

"Massa, dah berfs am made up," Cal answered, with great gravity.

In preparation for their expedition, Cal Beach, with a plumber's kit and some help from a friendly blacksmith, had performed a surgical operation of some delicacy upon the ancient Ford, which had just then come into his possession. The back of the front seat was amputated at the flanks and so arranged that it folded down, bridging, as it were, the space between the front and back cushions. In this position, with all the cushions in place, and furnished with a camp mattress, blankets and pillows, a very passable bed was provided. Reed slept on the driver's side to save Cal the danger of barking his long shins on the steering post, and, with this precaution, they were as comfortable as in any Pullman.

Cal had arranged the back and the cushions, spread the mattress, turned back the blankets, placed the pillows. Reed clung for a moment about his neck, then vaulted over the rattly side-door, flickering an affectionate hand toward his companion as he went.

"Good-night, Daddy X," he called.

"Good-night, Reedie-boy."

Reed turned to a study of the stars which peered down, very thick and friendly, from the Milky Way overhead, and Cal retraced his steps to the fire, musing as he went over the amazing wonderlands of childhood. He stirred the fire to new life with some fresh branches and settled down, his back against a friendly tree, for his bedtime smoke. These bedtime smokes were his thinking hour. During the day his time and thought were given to Reed and Antelope, but at night, after the boy was in bed, he would sit by the campfire and marshal past, present, and future in review.

"What a kid he is!" he exclaimed to himself. "Eight—nine in September. Twenty-six, eh, Cal? With a family, but without a wife. How time flies—and how it drags! Both. The days seem endless, but how the weeks slip by!

"Eight years—nine in September. Twenty-six. I used to think a man was old at twenty-six. And so he is. I am old at twenty-six."

He leaned back, his square shoulders resting against the tree, while his mind, from contemplating the childhood of Reed, skipped down the years to his own first recollections. There stretched the leafy street in the little university city of Kingston; there basked the big garden in which he and Celesta romped as children. There were the apple tree and the swing, and the flower beds that must not be touched, except by permission. There was the solid limestone house, with vines clambering over the porch and shutters.

Inside, his father sat in the big chair in the front room upstairs, with the fireplace and walls lined with books. It seemed to Cal that front room had always been filled with books and shadows, with his father, master

shadow of them all, in the big chair before the fire. As Cal remembered him, his father was very tall, with a stoop, and a face which receded wherever the bones would let it, and a way of being busy just now. Cal had always thought of his father as old. There were times, rare times, when his father wasn't busy just now; times when the lad clambered up the long, thin legs and explored the strange cavities in their owner's face. Those were moments not to be forgotten, but they came only at great intervals. Professor Beach's devotion to his university had to be bought with a price, so it seemed. And it was Cal who paid.

Cal and Celesta. Celesta, two years older than Cal, was able to recall, partly by memory, more by imagination, the brave days before Mama went away. Those were the days when Daddy wasn't always busy just now; days of walks and picnics and great times before the study fire. Those were the days, so Celesta said, although Cal never quite credited this, before the strange hollows had come in Daddy's face. Then the angels came for Mama—that was how Celesta told it—and sent men to carry her away in a black box. And Aunt Bertha had come to live in her place.

Cal had learned why the hollows had dug their deep trenches in his father's face. The day he was fourteen he was summoned into the study. "Sit down, Calvin, my boy," said a voice out of the shadows. "I think you are fourteen today. Quite a man now, Cal, eh?"

"Yes, Daddy," said the boy, wondering for what offence he had been summoned.

"I am just three times your age, Calvin; just forty-two. Not very old, eh, Calvin?"

Cal thought forty-two was very old, but he did not

say so. He had learned that the professorial mind is not to be disputed.

"Forty-two is not very old, Calvin," his father repeated, "but I suppose it must be old enough. One can grow very weary in even forty-two years. But fourteen is very young to be left alone."

"Why, Daddy, are you going away?" said Cal, catching only half his father's meaning.

"Yes, Calvin."

"When? May I go? And Celesta?"

"Not now. Later. I am going to your mother, Calvin. Some time this year."

It seemed to Cal that his father had purposely chosen to sit in the shadow, where his face could not be seen clearly. The boy felt as though a great band were tightening about his ribs.

"You had to know, Calvin," his father continued after a silence, "and it is as well that you should know now. I have seen this coming, ever since your mother went, and before. That is why I took the extra classes at the university, so that there might be something saved for you and Celesta. . . . It isn't much. If I had been a farmer, or a bricklayer, or a machinist— but a university professor! Doctor of languages; seven languages as my mother tongue— But there, I must not be bitter. When the bills are paid it will keep you and Celesta perhaps two years. Then you will have to make your way, my boy."

Cal had meant to answer bravely, but on the last words came a catch in his father's voice, and the next he knew he was up and infolded in the long, thin arms. Tears were mingled, and Cal went out with a blessing and a memory.

The day came, sooner than he had expected, when Dr. Beach could not leave his room. A strange woman

arrived at the house to look after Daddy, and strange men, heavy, as Cal thought, with professorial wisdom, came often to visit their sick associate. They looked upon Cal and Celesta with grave eyes, and one of them had laid his hand on Cal's shoulder. . . .

After the death of his father Cal learned that the house which he had always known as home was in some way connected with the university, and they must vacate it. Aunt Bertha saw them settled in rooms in a cheaper part of the town and left them with her blessing and the explanation that their little capital would support two longer than three. Celesta was quite old enough to keep house.

"Celesta, my dear," Aunt Bertha had said on that last morning, while they waited for the expressman after her trunks were packed, "Celesta, my dear, you have been well brought up; you will be sister and mother to that tremendous boy." To Aunt Bertha Cal had always for some reason been "that tremendous boy." Aunt Bertha had been raised among girls, and had never married. "Your money will last a couple of years; that will see him through high school; then he must go to work." Aunt Bertha delivered that ultimatum, so Cal thought, with unnecessary relish of the inevitable.

A lawyer who had been named their guardian paid the rent of their little flat and gave them a weekly living allowance. Celesta proved a good manager, and when they had recovered from the first shock of their father's death, life for the brother and sister moved very pleasantly indeed. Cal finished his high school course at sixteen and declared himself ready to carry out his aunt's decree about going to work, but Celesta would have none of it. "When you have gone through university, Cal," she said, "then I will let you work for me. Until then I am going to work for you."

Cal protested, but Celesta's mind was made up, and Cal, being the younger, had come to know how inexorable was his sister's mind when it was made up. "The housework is nothing," she had said; "I can do it morning and evening, like winking. I can get work in an office, and it will be fun to have my big brother in college. You will work through the summer. I am sure we can manage."

So Cal was persuaded; Celesta went to an office, and he to college. He had not troubled to decide for what particular purpose he would go to college; that could come later. All went well for a year or two, but the time came when Celesta's devotion to her office and her housekeeping seemed suddenly to be interrupted. There were many nights when she had "a date"; there were evenings when she did not come home to dinner. Cal, philosophical always, accepted the situation, mildly wondering.

Finally came the day when Celesta announced that she was going to Montreal; she had been offered a much better position; she could make more money; it would be to Cal's advantage more than hers. He could stay at a boarding house; it would be more companionable than their lonely rooms. The idea appealed to Cal but little, but he accepted it without much argument. It was apparent that Celesta had made up her mind again; besides, he did not forget that it was to her efforts he owed the possibility of attending college.

After Celesta had gone she sent him money two or three times, generously, but at irregular intervals; then the remittances ceased altogether. Fortunately Cal had found summer work in a printing office, so he was not penniless, but an uneasiness concerning Celesta grew upon him. He had just turned eighteen, and these eighteen years had flowed, in the main, along the

sheltered paths of life. He was neither suspicious nor sophisticated. He had an undefined but abounding confidence in the goodness of humanity. He was an optimist.

Then, one evening, just as he came home to his boarding house from the printing shop, a telegram was placed in his hand. He looked at it curiously, signed for it, and carried it to his room. It was a new and somewhat important experience; never before had he received a telegram. On his way upstairs he began to associate it with Celesta. Perhaps she was coming home; perhaps he was to meet her at the train! He took the last three steps at a bound.

In his room he tore open the envelope. The upper part of the sheet was a series of unintelligible characters, but the central sentence leapt out at him.

Your sister very sick in private hospital here wants you

It was a moment before Cal grasped its significance. When he read it again he saw it was signed by a Doctor Anson, and an address was given.

The boy walked to the window and looked out on the quiet street, filled with the glory of September. But he saw nothing of the glory now, for a tremendous fear was clutching at his heart. "Celesta! Celesta!" The name came dry from his lips. Could there be a world—could there be life—without Celesta?

There was time to catch the evening train, and he fortunately had a few dollars in his pocket. He packed the battered club bag handed down by Dr. Beach, told the landlady he would be gone for a day or two, and hurried away.

It was midnight when he reached the city. Clamorous cab drivers barked for his bag and his patronage,

and, not knowing which street car to take, he parted with a dollar to be driven to his address. It proved a large but dingy house, once the residence of a prosperous family, but now reduced to the status of a sort of boarding house for sick persons. By the dim light of a porch lamp he pressed the bell, and waited.

After a considerable period the door was opened by a young woman in nurse's uniform. "I am the only one on night duty," she explained, as she showed him into a little office off from the main hall. "I was busy with a patient and could not come at once to the door. Dr. Anson, of course, does not live in at nights."

Cal was conscious of an odor of disinfectants and an oppressive sense of being among the sick. "I am sorry to trouble you at such an hour," he said, "but I got Dr. Anson's telegram just in time to catch the night train. I am Cal Beach."

The nurse regarded him with interest, but the name did not appear to carry any suggestion to her mind.

"Yes, Mr. Beach? And what can we do for you?"

"It is about my sister. She is here, and very sick. Dr. Anson telegraphed me to come at once." As though to support his statement he produced his telegram.

"What is her name?" the nurse inquired.

"Celesta Beach. Spelled B-e-a-c-h."

"Beach? I don't remember any Beach." She turned to a register and scanned a couple of pages. Finally, "No Celesta Beach here."

"But there must be," Cal insisted. "See, I have the telegram."

The nurse ran a pencil through her hair and puckered her lips as though studying a deep puzzle. "What is she like?" she asked at length.

"She is young—about twenty—and looks a bit like

me," said Cal, blushing a little at the reference to his personal appearance.

"Pretty?" the nurse suggested. Cal wondered how a nurse could be frivolous in the presence of sickness, but his color deepened a trifle under her eyes. "I shouldn't tease," she continued, suddenly, penitently. "Let me see—"

Nurse Rooke pondered a moment. "Mrs. Raymond has been asking for her brother," she said, "and I believe Dr. Anson *did* wire for someone. But, of course, she couldn't be your sister."

"No—no. My sister is not married, and her name is Celesta Beach."

"Better come along with me," said the sophisticated nurse, springing up quickly under the impetus of a sudden idea. "Strange things happen in hospitals."

Cal followed her with a sense that he was groping vaguely. He was conscious mainly of the hospital smell and the shuffle of his feet on the silenced floors.

Nurse Rooke led him into a room. On the bed a woman was lying, her face pale, worn; her eyes closed; her dark hair braided and falling about her cheeks. She stirred with a sense of their presence.

"Is she your sister?" the nurse asked, gently.

But the boy was beside the bed, leaning over, peering into her face. "Celesta!" he cried. "Celesta!" and fell on his knees beside her.

Slowly she opened her eyes, strangely big against her pale, thin face, and looked into his. "Cal," she breathed. "Cal, my brother . . . I have been expecting you." She drew a thin hand from under the coverlet and reached for his. "Cal, my brother!" . . .

"I came at once—first train after the telegram. Why didn't you let me know? What is the matter?"

Celesta's eyes swept the little room. The nurse had

gone. Then the lids fell, and, as he watched, Cal saw little pools of water gather through her lashes.

"Celesta, dear," he whispered, "tell me."

"It isn't easy telling," she said at length, in a voice so low he hardly could hear it. "I wonder what you will think. Look."

Gently she turned down the coverlet and Cal got a vision of a little pink head, with eyes prodigiously puckered against the light, and a little pink fist clutched and groping.

"Celesta! Married! . . . Who is this Raymond?"

Again she closed her eyes. "I am not married, Cal," she murmured. "There is no Raymond."

The boy staggered to a chair, dazed by the terrific, unexpected blow. When he did not speak, she continued in a voice that was all pleading and yet had in it a note of challenge, almost of defiance—the voice of the self-willed Celesta: "Try not to think too bitterly of me, Cal. I won't be here long. The doctor says—something wrong—I will not get better." . . .

He was at her side again. "I do not think bitterly of you, Celesta. But . . . but . . ." His voice failed. Then, his cheek against hers, "Tell me, Celesta."

"It's not much to tell. I loved him. I thought he was a god. I neglected you for him. I gave up everything for him. Then—he persuaded me to leave you, that our secret might be kept. He made me great promises; he promised me everything. Then, at last, he—he went away. . . . I know I am to blame, Cal; I accept my punishment, but—I loved him. He was half god, half—half devil."

"And now you hate him, as I hate him," said Cal, through his teeth.

Again she turned her eyes to him. "No, Cal. I love him."

He leaned back, perplexed, confused, struggling in currents too deep for his years. "What can I do?" he demanded, after a silence.

"Will you do one thing for me? Bring up the boy as your own, and promise he shall never know. Promise me that, Cal." And, folding her within his arms, he promised.

"Oh, it is true, Cal—it is true!" she cried, when he had released her. "See—the promise." She pointed to a motto, the only decoration that hung on the bare walls. "A bruiséd reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench."

"That has been my ray of light, Cal. I have yearned to it, hung on it, all these days. His kindness which would not break the bruiséd reed—would it reach out to me? It has—it does, in you!" The boy took her in his arms again, and for lack of something better to say, whispered in her ear, "My bruiséd reed—my bruiséd reed!"

Finally she sent him to get a room, and a sleep. He did not see her again, alive.

Cal was fortunate enough to find a Mrs. Barnes, who had raised six boys and sent them out into the world, and whose mother heart was still unsatisfied. When Mrs. Barnes looked into the great blue eyes of Celesta's baby it was not hard to make a bargain.

"What is his name?" she asked.

"Reed—Reed Beach," said Cal.

Mrs. Barnes took Cal as a boarder, as well as the baby, and Cal immediately found work in a printing office. He had made up his mind that under no circumstances would he go back to his old home. The secret of Celesta was well hid. The hospital had known

her only as Mrs. Raymond. He had given his pledge for the boy's sake, and for the boy's sake, and Celesta's, and his own, that pledge he would keep though the heavens fell. The few belongings he had left at the boarding house would satisfy his small debts.

The printing office in which Cal worked was also a newspaper publishing office. Perhaps it was a romantic twist in the boy's nature, together with a certain joy which he found in expressing ideas in words, which led him to seek reportorial work. With a baby to support, he needed all the money he could earn, and night assignments presently began to supplement his weekly wage as a printer. He covered police, morgues, hotels, and got a glimpse of a life far removed from that of a professor's family and a sleepy university town. He began to see that the tragedy which had befallen Celesta was not altogether exceptional. She had been a bruiséd reed, it was true, but now he moved among reeds not merely bruised, but broken. . . . Out of his experiences his young mind, groping for some solid philosophy of life, arrived at the conclusion that the great error for which all the world pays penalty is misdirected effort. Every human soul, he thought, is an engine which *will* go; the thing is to put it at useful work and save it from blowing itself, and others, to pieces. . . . Even this Raymond fellow—he thought of him as Raymond for lack of another name —even he must have had his better qualities. It was impossible to think of the strong-willed Celesta—

It was when Reed was almost three, and giving promise of being another "tremendous" boy, as Aunt Bertha would have said, that Cal conceived the conceit of teaching the lad to call him "Daddy X." Daddy he was already called; the x he added in its algebraic sense, as signifying the unknown quantity.

About this time his interest in sociology excited within him a determination to resume his university studies. He re-entered college, this time with a definite purpose in view. At nights he continued his reportorial rounds to make a living for himself and the boy.

Cal recalled the proud day, now only a few months ago, when, his course completed, he had faced the world on what he considered his mission of life. His immediate plan was to do a series of sociological studies for one of the more serious-minded magazines, and at the same time gather material for a book for popular circulation, which he hoped would not only advance his cause, but provide money with which he could continue his work. But he had barely begun on this program when Dr. Anson, in whom he had found a personal friend, vetoed it.

"It's the open air for you, my boy," he had said, after the examination; "the open air, and no more of this day and night grind. A year or two in the open, say on the prairies, and you may be all right. No more of this grind!"

"But, Doctor, my work—"

"But, Cal, your life—and your boy."

The boy. Oh, yes, there was the boy! Of course, the boy. . . .

Reed was eight now; going to school; healthy, happy; more "tremendous" than even Cal had been; whimsical; romantic; serious only in those bedtime moments when Cal reminded him of his mother Celesta, and they repeated his verse together, and he told him whence his name had come. Yes, there was the boy.

Cal had gathered his little capital about him, bought a second-hand Ford and some camping utensils, and

said good-bye to the heartbroken Mrs. Barnes. And here they were.

The fire had died until only a few coals glowed before him; a chill of night air came up from the lake; the stars shone stolidly overhead. The river, swollen with the spring overflows of the prairie sloughs, muttered gurglingly at his feet. Into its black tide he looked as though it could give, perhaps, some answer to the mystery of life.

Then he yawned, tapped the ashes from his pipe, put it away, and went to bed.

CHAPTER THREE

REED awakened with the sun pouring in upon him. His arm, reaching under the blankets beside him, found the place empty, and he sprang up from his pillow. In the gravel nearby he saw Cal bending over a fire.

"Hello, Daddy X!" he cried. "Why didn't you call me? What luck for breakfast?"

"Big doings, Reed; big doings! Come and see."

The boy clambered out of the car and ran to the spot where Cal, frying pan in hand, leaned over his little fire. An appetizing odor came up from something grilling on the hot metal.

"Smells scrumptious," Reed approved. "What is it, Daddy X?"

"A secret. Listen. Hold down your head. Let me whisper. *Wild duck!*"

"Wild duck? How? But you said we mustn't shoot them; you said it was against the law?"

"The law allows an exception for explorers threatened with starvation. We are explorers, Reed, threatened with starvation—if we don't get something to eat. And on top of that, when this fine drake a-lit on the river just at daybreak it was too much for an empty stomach, Reed."

"But I didn't hear you shoot?"

"You are a sound sleeper. Conscience sits light on a young stomach, as well as on an empty one. Now, have your dip. It's cold, but safe, if you stay near the shore."

With a sudden contortion of his arms the boy emerged from his nightdress. There was a gleam of sunlight on his lithe little body as he plunged into the stream. He came up sputtering and shaking.

"O-o-w-h!" he shouted. "You said it was cold, and you were right!" The boy was jumping about on the gravel. "O-o-w-h!—Where's the towel?"

"Try a sun rub, Reed. It's better for you, and saves laundry."

The boy raced up and down the bank, rubbing his body with his hands as he went. In a minute or two the morning sun and air had whipped him clean and dry.

After breakfast: "How's Ante this morning? Have you called the roll?"

"Ante*lope,* please. No, sir, the roll has not been called."

"Very well. Sergeant, call the roll."

Brisk and business-like, Reed plunged into the tool kit for the tire gauge and made a quick examination of the wheels while Cal measured their oil and gasoline resources. Then he presented himself with a salute.

"Front left, sixty; rear left, sixty-five; front right, sixty; rear right, fifty."

Cal returned the salute. "Fifteen pounds fatigue duty for rear right."

"Yes, sir!"

More business with the gasoline tank. Then:

"Sergeant, our advance is cut off!"

"General! How cut off?"

"No gasoline."

"No gasoline!"

"Just a drop—perhaps a quart. Sergeant, you are a practical man. We have gasoline enough for five

miles, and oil enough for fifteen miles; how far can we go?"

"Twenty miles!"

"Good! Let us be off!"

But on the way up the long hill out of the valley Reed slipped from his happy world of make-belief. "What are we going to do for gasoline, Daddy X?" he ventured. "You gave your last money to the man who pulled us out of the mud."

"Yes. We are in a bad way. We have neither money nor gasoline. What do we do when we have neither money nor gasoline?"

"Write a story. Oh, Daddy X, write the story of the oak and the elm!"

But Cal shook his head. The youngster was thinking of the recourse Cal had had to newspapers in the cities they had come through; he was generally able to sell some kind of "story" to buy gasoline and food.

"No newspaper market here," he had to say.

"Isn't there a paper in Plainville?"

"A country paper. But country papers don't buy stories, usually. The editor writes his own, or acquires them by means of a long pair of shears and a paste-pot. No, Sergeant, the army must go to work."

"Where? On a farm?"

"On a farm. On the first farm we come to. Certainly on a farm within five miles."

"Oh, goodie!"

"A tremendous word for a sergeant, I must say," said the general, severely.

They were up on the rolling prairie again, bowling through a country tufted with groves of small poplars and willows. Presently a trail led off to the left through a gate in a wire fence and lost itself amidst the poplars. Cal brought his car to a stop.

"Consultation of staff," he announced. "Doubtless that trail leads to a farm-yard. Shall we go in?"

"We are out of gasoline?"

"Almost."

"And food?"

"Almost."

"And money?"

"Quite."

"Let us go in."

"Very good, Sergeant."

He turned the wheels to the left and the rickety car contorted itself strangely but successfully down into the ditch and up again. The gate was open and they rumbled along a trail threading its way among the poplars. Suddenly it broadened into an open space and they found themselves in the midst of a village of farm buildings. There was a scurrying of poultry out of their way and much chatter from a flock of geese more than half disposed to hostility. Cal brought his car to an abrupt stop, wedged between an obstreperous steer and the corner of a log building.

Around the corner of the building, from the eastward, came the shadow of a man, grotesque and squatty on the hard-packed earth of the barnyard. In immediate pursuit of the shadow came the substance; six feet and sixty years of substance; broad-chested substance under a blue cotton shirt and blue duck overalls held in precarious position by a pair of red leather suspenders with two ruptured eyelets; the whole surmounted by a large, ruddy, and not ill-natured face, fringed about the ears with a pleasant tangle of grey hairs and topped with a submissive lump of straw hat.

"Whoa, Eliza!" he exclaimed. "Jumpin' jack rabbits, who have we here?"

"Two hired men," said Cal. "You weren't expecting us?"

"Not as you'd notice it. Whose hired men?"

"Yours."

The farmer removed the twisted accumulation from his head and harrowed his scalp with his thick fingers. "Well, I'll be danged," he confided at last. "I admit bein' in Plainville last night an' havin' a bit more formalin than was good for me, but I don't have no recollection of hirin' a man an' a boy an' a tin Lizzie. What is the deal?"

The farmer's partial confession opened an unexpected channel for Cal's quick wits. "Forty dollars a month for me, during the season," he said; "the boy gets his board and goes to school, and Lizzie makes herself useful about the farm if you furnish the gasoline."

The thick fingers gently continued their harrowing, while a twinkle of amusement lit up the broad, red face.

"Not so bad," he confided. "I was afraid I might have sold you the farm, or got you engaged to Minnie, or traded off the wife's spaniel, or something serious like that. Well, Jackson Stake is a man that stands by his bargain. But one thing," he added, with an apparent twinge of apprehension; "nothin' o' this to the wife. She's a suspeecious creature, is the wife. I think she doubts all was well at Plainville last night. Not a word o' it to her. I'll tell her I met you just the now on the road and hired you, an' that's all there's to it. I can use another man all right, an' the boy can go to school, but you'll have to sleep in a grainery. As for Lizzie, you can pasture her out. I drive a Dodge."

Cal already knew something of the jealousies peculiar to owners of different makes of cars, and won-

dered whether the farmer's remark was to be taken as an indication of snobbery or a piece of harmless information. Aloud: "Good. Lead us to the granary, and let us get to work."

"Give 'er the juice," said Jackson Stake, and as Cal drew the car by him the farmer hopped on to the running-board with the agility of a boy of twenty. "To the right, around the pig pen. Gee! Gee! Don't you know gee from haw? To the right. Look out for the sow! Look out for the hay rack! Look out for the wagon tongue! There, the frame caboose, straight ahead."

Cal steamed straight ahead toward the "caboose," speeding up as he went, and brought the car to a sudden stop a yard from the door. The old man lurched forward with a jerk but did not lose his grip. "Jumpin' jack rabbits! If you're as quick a starter as you are a stopper we'll get along fine. . . This is it."

They got out and inspected "it." It was a frame building, twelve by fourteen feet; one thickness of drop siding nailed to two-by-four studs; floored with shiplap; roofed with shingles; a door in one end, a window, which could be removed, in the other. A heap of old sacks with a musty smell; a heap of old harness with a leathery smell; an old fanning-mill without any smell. Three sacks of screenings, up-ended and open-mouthed; probably chicken feed. The screenings had been strewed somewhat generously about the floor, and in a corner, where the rain had got in, had taken root and were sending thin, fungusy stalks groping up the board wall. The theory that the screenings were chicken feed was suddenly supported by a commotion in the farm-yard. An old rooster, on sentry-go, observing the granary door open, had given the "cook-house call," and the barnyard poultry were

sweeping down upon them from every direction like cavalry in a charge, shedding superfluous feathers as they came. They were into the fortress, among everybody's feet, dabbing with terrific velocity, before the garrison had time to drop the portcullis.

"Hist! Hist! Shoo!" cried Jackson Stake, making a great swipe with his foot which caught a rooster on the wish-bone and sent him somersaulting under Antelope. "Hungry heathens! Who'd think they were fed an hour ago? Strike me! but I never could see how a four-pound hen could eat a bushel of wheat without wabblin'."

By united efforts they stemmed the charge and cleared the battle ground. "Well, this is it," the farmer repeated, when the door had been closed on the last invader. "You can dump this stuff in the hay shed, an' the wife'll give you a broom an' a mop, if you're fastid'ous. Got your own blankets?"

Cal nodded.

"Good! Now I'll go up to the house an' sort of break it gently. You know what it is to cook for two more mouths. Dang it, I don' blame 'er. If there's any doggonder job than a farmer's it's a farmer's wife's. In about ten minutes she'll be prepared for the worst, an' you bump in then to borrow the broom. Mind, now, give me ten minutes!" And the old farmer was off houseward, pursued by a scouting detachment from the poultry yard.

Cal and Reed exchanged looks which began seriously, and ended simultaneously in an outbreak of laughter. "But he *didn't* hire us last night, Daddy X," the boy protested, when his sides were settled.

"And I didn't say he did, if you noticed," Cal returned. "Just a bit of good luck, and when Fate hands you a bit of good luck, don't question her too

closely. Now, let's wrestle this stuff out of here. Let me see—that's the hay shed over there beyond the pig pen."

Cal took an observation of the position. It was evident that in the laying out of this ramble of structures on Jackson Stake's homestead no town planner had been employed. Most of the buildings were of logs, and the obvious theory was that the logs were hauled in winter and dumped wherever chance dictated, and in the spring a building was put up wherever the logs happened to lie. One larger building, which might, in a pinch, be called a barn, elbowed off a swarm of lesser brethren crowding in about its feet, much as Jackson Stake warded off the chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, and young pigs which pursued him on his perambulations about the yard. Except for the house, which was of boards and stood a little to one side, the cardinal points of the compass had been blandly disregarded. Everywhere were buildings, pointing in every direction, in all states of repair and disrepair, with gaping doors yawning in the morning sunshine, housing, no doubt, all sorts of strange quadrupeds. The place gave promise of enormous interest.

The granary which was to be their home was built on two logs or skids, roughly pointed, so that it could be hauled beside the "set" at threshing time and filled direct from the separator. It seemed to have been left just at the spot where the loitering of the horses had overbalanced the persistence of their driver. It pointed nowhere in particular. Nearby, and similarly pointed, was another granary, its exact double. It gave signs of habitation, as over the door, scrawled with brown paint on the side of an apple box, was the legend, "Dinty Moore."

Cal absorbed these general facts as he loaded the

sacks and harness into the Ford for transportation to the hay shed. When this was done they went up to the house, assuming that Jackson Stake would now have completed his preliminary overtures. The house stood a little to the north of the principal cluster of buildings; it was a four-cornered box with a roof, and a chimney at each end of the roof. The door was in the centre of the eastern side, and in reaching the door from the barnyard one made a detour around a water barrel which had leaked somewhat copiously at the southeastern corner. This detour, however, could not be accomplished in a wide and curving movement; some sharp angles were necessary to avoid collapse over the pile of stove wood which occupied the right front of the prospect. A hewn block of wood served as a doorstep, with a fragment of plough-share nailed to one end as a boot scraper. Dexterous footwork over a washtub and sundry minor utensils landed Cal and Reed safely upon the step.

The door was open, and their shadow, falling inwards, announced their presence. Jackson Stake was seated in a big chair, prodding his pipe with a straw from the kitchen broom, while Mrs. Stake wrestled an ample armful of dough on the wooden table. "This is the missus," said the farmer, without rising. "She'll be glad to see you."

"I'd be a heap gladder to see a woman," said Mrs. Stake, severely, without looking up from her dough. "You men are all alike; seem to think there's no limit to the mouths a woman can fill. Jackson can always get another man or two, whether he needs him or not, but I can't get a woman, not for the soul or sake o' me. Come in!"

She was tall and square, big boned and not over fleshed. As she kneaded the dough the muscles of her

arms rose and fell like those of a man. With a knife she severed a section, moulded it skillfully into shape, and tucked it into a pan with a twin brother. With all her brusqueness there was a touch of something akin to tenderness as she patted it into place. She crossed the floor with quick, straight strides and set it to rise on a board bridging two chairs beside the oven. Then as she looked up, "Hello? Where'd the boy come from?"

"He's mine."

"Yours? Did you hire *him,* too, Jackson?" Apparently Jackson's courage had failed him before he got this far in his revelation. "Yours, did you say?" again to Cal. "Yours and whose?"

"Mine—adopted. My sister's," Cal explained.

Mrs. Stake looked at Reed and Reed looked at Mrs. Stake, and as they looked all the woman's sternness melted into an expression very human and motherly. "Come on in, Son," she said. "I know you're hungry. Boys o' eight or nine are always hungry. I've raised three, an' I know."

She broke a bun from a fine fresh brown panful just out of the oven and placed it in the boy's hand. Then she turned to her kneading. "It's not that I mind work," she confided in the dough; "what I mind is everlastin' work, mornin', noon an' night; never done. The men can get help, even when they don' partic'lar need it, but the women just have to plug alone. There's Minnie, now; if she'd stuck to the farm—— But she bolted. I dunno as I blame her. Some days I'm blame near boltin' myself. Well, what d'ye want?" to Cal, who still stood framed in the doorway.

"A broom and a mop, if you please," Cal answered.

"For what?"

"To brush up the granary a bit."

Mrs. Stake regarded Cal with some curiosity. "Partic'lar, ain't ye? Well, I dunno but it's a good idea." She rubbed the dough from her hands and filled a pail with hot water. From behind the door she produced a broom and a mop, and severely handed the lot to Cal, who thanked her and started for the granary. At the corner by the leaky water barrel he was arrested by her sharp voice calling him.

"You'll be sendin' the boy to school," she called, "an' I'll wager his clo'es is more holy than righteous. Bring 'im in to-night an' I'll darn 'em up."

CHAPTER FOUR

BY midday the granary wore a very different appearance. The floor had come through the ordeal of soap and water with mixed emotions, but now, convinced that no harm was intended, and that this was only the strange way of these strange people, it smiled back pleasantly upon Cal and Reed as they sorted their few belongings into position. The cushions from the Ford would continue to be their bed; set on the corner of the floor, and equipped with mattress, blankets, and pillows, they looked tempting enough for a noon-day nap, not to speak of nights after heavy labor in the fields. The suitcases were opened; Cal's mirror and shaving set hung from nails in the wall; the gun straddled over the door, and the cartridges sat on a little shelf which Cal had built; even the spare tire with the blow-out, hanging by the window, helped to lend a furnished air to the place. A table and chairs would come in time; they were luxuries, not necessities. Outside, Cal had moved the grindstone so that it stood parallel with the granary, and not in reckless disregard of any definite angle to it; had built little brackets on which he hoisted the binder knives that had been found lying in the grass nearby; had moved four sections of drag harrows from the side around to the back and had stood them up on edge with some show of symmetry, and had carried a log which leaned against the granary for no particular purpose except in fulfillment of fate to the general log pile, where its fate could more conveniently be fulfilled. Inside and out the granary pro-

claimed that a soul had moved in to possess a body just comfortably started on its way to disintegration.

It was noon before they knew it, filled with that peculiar lightness of heart which has to do with the making of a place in which to live. The jingle of trace chains and the heavy stamping of work horses were their first reminder that the morning was gone. The farm-yard shook itself awake, discarded its air of sunny indolence, and suddenly became a scene of bustling activity. Twelve great horses, arranged in three teams of four, each harnessed abreast, sweeping in from the fields, now crowded aggressively about the long wooden water trough in the centre of the yard—(if an area so undefined as Jackson Stake's farm-yard can be said to have a centre. Just where the yard began or ended no one knew or cared). A lanky young man with a gait apparently acquired in the supporting of his overalls moved a lever and presently from overhead came the rush of air in the blades of the windmill and the slow "clank . . . clank" of the connecting-rod as it operated the pump.

"Grit, old Jim is checked up," said the young man with the gait to a head suddenly thrust through a space in the shouldering mass of horse-flesh. The head was crowned with a straw hat which, either through age or misadventure, had lost the greater part of its brim; underneath the remnant a pair of deep eyes twinkled slowly as though lit by unseen fires of humor far within, and an expanse of cheek and chin gave roothold to a stubby whisker well laden with dust and sand. The head made its way amid the heaving backs to a great bay who, with nostrils high in air, was snorting his protest above the busy drinking of his companions. A hand, no doubt associated with the head, unhooked

the check-line, and the bay, feeling release, plunged his eager muzzle deep into the water.

"Got to check 'im, Gander," said the head. "He won't do nothin' but flirt with this Mollie-mare if he ain't checked up short. Fact. When I think o' him, an' then o' you, I says to myself, 'Old bay, you're almost human.' "

"Come, Dinty, I ain't no flirt," said the man addressed as Gander. "You know that. Ain't in my line." But his voice suggested that the charge was not distasteful.

"Can I help?" said Cal, who had approached unheard above the clamor of the horses. "I am the new hired man. My name is Cal Beach."

The two others turned toward him and regarded him for a moment in silence. While they were thus engaged a third figure, a youth of eighteen or thereabout, emerged from the mass. All three regarded him.

"Well, welcome to our city," said the man who answered alternately to the names of Grit and Dinty. "You're the new hired man. I'm the old hired man. It's the business of the old hired man to boss the new hired man, eh, Gander?"

Gander was non-committal. "Didn't know Dad was figurin' on hirin' any more help," he remarked. "However, he's the doctor. What can you do?"

"Not so very much, I am afraid. I can drive a Ford——"

" 'An' it takes a good man to do that,' " Grit chanted from a popular song.

"——and horses a little, and I'm middling strong, and—I've been through university."

The words were not out before he realized how inapt they were. "Hang it!" he thought, "that isn't what I meant. I meant to let them know that I wasn't a dub,

that I had sense, that I could pick up things if they gave me a chance."

"Sounds all right, all but the last," said Gander. "Don't know as what they learn you in the university 'll help much. A man on a farm don' need no D.D.'s, or whatever it is, after his name. What he wants is horsepower an' savvy. Well, we'll see. Go down to the barn an' throw some hay in the mangers."

"Savvy," thought Cal. "That was the word. Means the same thing—or should . . . But does it?"

Reed was at his heels as he entered the barn. The building was of poplar logs, with a loft overhead, and gables boarded perpendicularly with shiplap. Mangers ran along each end, and were cross-sectioned by short partitions which divided the space into stalls, each wide enough for two horses. From the ends of these short partitions stout posts supported the loft and gave anchorage for wooden harness pegs. Small stones and gravel to the depth of several inches, impacted under the hoofs of many horses, made a floor almost as hard as rock.

Cal and Reed had barely time to fill the mangers from the hay shed when the horses were down upon them. As each came in, nodding his head and clanking his harness prodigiously, he walked straight to his stall and made an immediate inspection of the oat box nailed to the corner of the manger. Finding it empty his nostrils went up in annoyance, but a moment later, evidently on the theory that half a loaf is better than no bread, he plunged into the fragrant hay.

"Hello, who's the kid?" said Gander, encountering the boy in the doorway. "Another hired man?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Reed, sir."

"Reed what?"

"Reed Beach."

Gander stroked the back of his long neck meditatively. "You don' mean he's your daddy?" he said, indicating Cal with a jerk of his head.

"He's my Daddy X."

Gander seemed to mouth a remark, but swallowed it. Then:

"An' have you been through university, too?" Cal, from his work between two horses, heard the words, and they struck home nastily. But his heart bounced at the boy's prompt rejoinder:

"Not yet, but I'm going to. Have you?"

"Why, no; can't say as I have," said Gander, and his hand dropped from his long neck and gave Reed's hair a not unfriendly tousle. "All the horses got oats?" he demanded, in a voice intended to reach Grit Wilson. "Well, c'mon an' eat. C'mon, Cal."

The youth of eighteen or so had preceded them to the house. Humped over a bench beside the water barrel he was engaged in splashy and noisy ablutions.

"That'll do, Ham," said Wilson, crowding him away from the bench very much as the horses had crowded each other at the water trough. "You ain't titivatin' to go over to Double F's at this time o' day."

Wilson inspected the granite-ware basin, half full of dirty water, as though debating whether the fluid would serve one more turn. Evidently he decided against it. With a sweep of his arm he sprayed the water over the yard.

"You don' need washin'," said Gander to Cal and Reed, who were standing waiting their turn. "Go on in."

"Oh, we'd rather wash, if we may," said Cal.

"Sure, you may. No law agin it," Gander agreed. "Go ahead."

Cal washed. The coarseness of the basin and of a huge bar of laundry soap was compensated by the fresh rain water and the warm spring sunshine. When he had washed someone shoved the towel into his hand. It was of heavy duck, made down from a grain sack, and showed many evidences of use and abuse. Through eyes smarting with the strong soap he tried to locate a spot less soiled than the average. When he turned to empty his basin he found Gander burrowing in it.

A side of biscuit tin nailed to the wall made a passable mirror, and a wire comb chained nearby completed the toilet equipment.

"C'mon," said Gander again. "Don' keep the ol' lady waitin'. She's a bit skittish."

Inside, a long table, covered with oilcloth that had once been white but through which black smudges of wear were now showing at the creases and corners, stood in the middle of the floor. Chairs were set about it and the men moved straight to their places, much, as Cal again thought, as did the horses in the stable.

Cal and Reed hung back. "Sit down, anywhere," said Jackson Stake. "No formal'ties. Now dig in."

They "dug in"—into boiled potatoes and mashed turnips and fried pork and hot, strong tea and bread thick and white and flaky and butter smooth and yellow and delicious. Mrs. Stake had a large family to feed, and she fed them, as her husband said, without formalities, but she fed them well. She herself did not join them, but waited on the table, reloading bread plates, refilling potato bowls and tea-cups as the ravages of the moment demanded. Then, at the first sign of a pause, came great helpings of rice-and-raisin

pudding dumped from a mighty spoon into plates just cleared of meat and potatoes.

"We're a bit rough an' ready," she apologized to Cal as she loaded his plate. "'Specially since Minnie left I don' get time to wash any more dishes than I jus' can't help. You're a city man an' I reckon you've been places where they give you a heap more tablecloth an' a heap less to eat. More puddin', Son?" to Reed. "Fill up. It's a long time till supper."

The men consumed amazingly big meals in an amazingly short time; and as each cleared his plate he got up and went out. Presently Cal noted that only he and Reed remained. Mrs. Stake swept the soiled dishes from a corner of the table and sat down with her own well-laden plate.

"Ever worked on a farm?" she demanded, presently.

"No. This will be my first attempt. I expect to find it a great life."

"Don' over-expect yourself. It's a great life, all right, if you don' have to live it. That's why everybody's leavin' the farm for the city."

"But they're not," Cal ventured to correct her. "For example, I've just left the city for the farm."

"That's so," she said, looking at him curiously, as though she were examining some kind of specimen. Then, after a pause, "That's so. Perhaps I don' see it quite straight, thinkin' so much o' Minnie. You don' know her, of course. Well, she's my daughter—my only daughter, twenty-one in June, an' I set a heap by her. When I was raisin' the kids, slavin' all day an' danderin' 'round half the night with squawlin' babies, I useta say, 'Wait till Minnie grows up.' Minnie was the youngest, excep' Hamilton, an' she was my only girl, an' I sort o' set an extra store on her, as you might say. I suppose mothers have a sort o' sympathy for

their girls that they don' have for their boys; they know what's ahead of 'em. Well, I useta keep up those times with promisin' myself that when Minnie grew up her an' me 'd sort o' hit it off together. But would she stay on the farm? Not for the soul or sake o' her. She's thumpin' one o' them writin' machines in a lawyer's office in Plainville—though wha' they have to write about so much in Plainville beats me—an' I'm still scrapin' the pots an' pans."

Something suspiciously like moisture gathered in the old woman's eyes and sent her reaching for the corner of her apron. "Land's sakes, you're long eaters!" she suddenly exclaimed. "The men'll be wantin' your help with the teams, though if you're just from the city I reckon they won' be missin' much. But you may as well jump in at once, as they say, an' get your feet wet. Away wi' ye!" She waved them out of the house.

"It's not that she wanted to hurry us off to work," Cal summed it up to himself. "She had shown a little more of her heart than she intended—to a stranger. And not a bad heart at that, or I'm mistaken. . . . I wonder about this Minnie."

Jackson Stake met him in the yard. "Can you handle horses?" he demanded.

"I've driven a team," Cal answered, recalling a week-end when he had taken Reed to the country, and had functioned on the reins of two downhearted nags then placed at his disposal. But a fine spirit of confidence was bubbling within him. It was the climate, the air, the sunshine, the big spaces, the big horses, the big meal, or something. Perhaps Minnie. At any rate he was beginning to understand why the only thing a Westerner feels apologetic about is having to apologize for anything. "Sure, I can drive a team," he asserted.

"You should, at forty dollars a month," the farmer

remarked drily. "But I suspec' what you have in mind is an Ontario team. Two horses. A team here is four horses—sometimes six. Can you drive four horses?"

"I never have," Cal confessed.

"Well, it don' come without learnin'. It takes a bit of eddication to run a farm—you'll find that, an' you may's well start at the bottom. Suppose you go along with Gander this afternoon an' keep your eyes an' ears open. I'll know by tomorrow how drunk I was when I hired you."

Something about the twinkle in the old man's eyes set Cal wondering just which had been playing with the other. Perhaps Jackson Stake really wanted another man and had dropped into his by-play on purpose. Well—

Gander's four horses were lined up like Company on Parade, and Gander was busy snapping the reins to the bits and affectionately cuffing the muzzles curled up at him as he went by.

"Will you show me how to do that?" Cal asked. "Let me get the system of it in my head. I'll savvy if you give me a chance."

Gander turned a not unfriendly look upon him. "Now you're shoutin'," he said. "It's easy; see—" He showed how the reins were connected; showed him the order in what looked like a chaos of harness. Perhaps it was because Professor Sterndale, Doctor of Philosophy, had a neck like Gander's that he leaped into Cal's mind at the moment. Or perhaps it was Gander's quiet, confident, efficient manner that summoned Sterndale up from memory. "Funny business," Cal thought; "Old Sterndale, Ph. D., and Gander Stake occupying the same brain cell in my lumber room. Doctor of Philosophy and horse engineer. Teachers, both of 'em." And then, the momentum of a new thought carrying

him off his balance, he took a mental stagger under the question whether or not Gander Stake was the greater teacher of the two. . . Certainly, for the moment at least, the more important.

Gander chirped to his team and they were on their way, the idle traces, flung over the horses' broad backs, jingling pleasantly as they went. Their road lay along a narrow lane between two sagging wire fences, with black, moist fields, ploughed and seeded, on either side. Innumerable blackbirds fluttered along the sagging wires. From the early sown field to the left the first faint flush of green peeked up between the serried ridges made by the drill. A hot sun poured down from a sky of polished steel, cloudless save for two tufts of wool dangling airily in the northeast.

"She's been handin' us a line o' good weather, I'll say," Gander remarked, by way of conversation. "That's one thing about a farmer; he can't make his conditions. He's got to take the weather God sends him, an' make the best of it. We're ploughin' now for oats; Grit and Ham ploughin', an' me followin' wi' the seeder. Sixty acres yet to plough for oats; then forty more for barley. Double F was saying,—that's him lives over on the next farm to the west—as he has a hundred acres in oats now, but I bet he ain't. Double F always has more acres at seedtime than when the bushels are counted from the thresher. Giddap, Jim! What you trippin' over?"

The great bay on the right answered with a shuffle of his body as much as to say, "Sorry; excuse me this time," and switched his tail at an imaginary fly.

"Why do you call him Double F?" Cal inquired. "You seem to have some funny names."

"Oh, I dunno. His name's Fraser Fyfe, so we cut it down to Double F. School teacher here, Annie

Frolic—you'll be goin' to her, Reed, once you get settled—says it means very loud, but I don' see no connection. Ham's a bit soft on Double F's daughter Elsie; that's what Grit was kiddin' him about at noon, you remember, when he was washin'. Nice girl, though. Her an' Minnie useta be back an' forth a lot. Ham's name is Hamilton, of course, but he jus' gets Ham, excep' from Mother. 'Hamburger Stake,' we call him sometimes, for fun. An' Grit; I guess that's his real name; dunno; sometimes I call 'im Dinty Moore. Looks a bit like 'im, I'll say."

Cal felt a delicacy about asking an explanation of Gander's own appellation, and Gander offered none, evidently quite overlooking the need of it. It was not entirely associated with his lean, flexible neck. When he was a boy of fourteen or fifteen years, his voice, in going through those contortions peculiar to the voices of boys of about that age, had shown a tendency to break out in a goose-like honk. To Gander's great embarrassment these honks would come at the most inopportune moments and wholly without notice, so that the most casual statement, begun in a tame and respectable note, ended in something suggestive of a wild goose piping to its mate. Some one called him Gander, and Gander stuck; it had stuck so long and so well that he had almost forgotten he had a christened name, William, perfectly good and only slightly used.

They had passed out of the lane into an unfenced field. Directly before them, with its tongue deep in the damp soil, was a two-wheeled implement which Cal supposed to be the seeder. It resembled a long trough with a cart wheel at either end, a quantity of short lengths of garden hose suspended underneath, and a series of steel discs resting on the ground. Gander dexterously swung his two "off" horses across the

tongue. Then he was at their heads, hitching the neck-yoke; then he was at their heels, hitching the traces, while Cal dog-trotted about after him, arriving at each scene of operations just after Gander had finished.

Gander carried the reins around behind the implement and started his team with a word, and Cal and Reed followed, watching the operations with great interest. The discs began to turn, scooping little, narrow trenches in the soil; into these trenches, through the rubber hose, kernels of oats began to fall, and to be immediately buried by a series of short chains dragging behind. It was very interesting. Presently Reed discovered, at the top of the hose, a little machine grinding the kernels down from the trough, almost as though it were counting them. It was tremendously interesting.

The field was a mile long, and it was accomplished without a word, save Gander's voice occasionally raised in admonition of his horses. The heat of the sun was tempered with a cool breeze which caught up particles of dust from the machine, so that it seemed to be trailing a miniature, low-hanging cloud. At the end of the field the horses turned, almost of their own accord, and would have started back had not Gander stopped them with a tension on the reins.

"Nothin' to it," he remarked; "nothin' to it. Old Jim there knows the job as well as I do. All you got to do is watch that you're almost touching your last row, without overlappin' it. If you overlap it's a waste o' seed an' time; if you don' touch it means a strip not sowed. Nobody'll know about it now, but the whole neighborhood 'll know in a month from now, when the crop comes up, an' they'll say to me, 'Gander, you must o' been borie-eyed when you sowed your

oats,' an' I'll have to say, 'Not me. It was that D. D. of ours, his eddication havin' been neglected in his youth.' Try it," and he thrust the reins into Cal's hand. "Watch your main wheel there; it should run right in the track we made comin' down, an' keep an eye now an' again that the grain is workin' through all the tubes; sometimes they get plugged up. Go to it!"

And so the day went on. By four in the afternoon Reed tired of following the seeder up and down as, like a mighty shuttle, it wove a web a mile wide from fringe to fringe, and went back to the farmyard, where he interested himself in a long and critical inspection of the old fanning mill. About the same time Gander pronounced his commendation upon Cal. "You're doin' O. K.," he said. "Take a round by yourself an' lend me some tobacco."

Cal handed over his pouch, and pressed on in high spirits. It was plain that his adaptability had made an impression upon Gander. "Funny world," he mused to himself, as he thought of Gander. "Not a bad scout, though, and that D. D. talk of his is just fun. Still, it's plain he thinks himself the best man of the two. And, damn it, he is—that's the joke of it. Well, he won't be, before long. I'll pick this up in no time. Oh boy, feel that air! I know I'm going to have lungs like a bellows before fall."

Tired, hungry, happy, Cal turned with his team to the farm-yard at the close of the day. Mrs. Stake could not pile his plate too high at supper, and when the chores were done, he and Reed were ready for bed.

"No story tonight, Reed," he said. "Too big a day, and too much to think about. Say your verse and let us roll in." And Reed, climbing on his knee for a good-night caress, said, "Gee, but it's great to be a farmer. When I grow up I'm going to be a farmer, with a lot

of big horses, and a granary, and a fanning mill, and everything."

Presently, up from the cushions of the old Ford came the measured breathing of two tired farmers sleeping the sleep of labor and contentment, while the last red rays of sunset faded out of the west and the still hush of night settled over the fields and prairies.

CHAPTER FIVE

AT SIX the next morning, while Cal, busy with the curry comb and brush, humped over the fetlock of Jim, the big bay, with whom he already had struck up something of a friendship, Jackson Stake entered the stable. He observed the currying process for a moment or two with apparent satisfaction.

"Good enough," he remarked, when Cal straightened up. "You know, Beach, a horse—any horse worth while—is as vain as a woman. You can make a hit with old Jim jus' combin' his mane an' fetlocks an' sayin' 'Jim, old boy, you're lookin' your best th' smorning.' Where's the lad?"

"Not up yet. All in last night, so I let him sleep."

"Sure. That's good for him. The missus was askin'. Seems to have taken kind of a shine to him. You know, we lost a boy, as you might say, an' a woman never gets over that kind o' thing."

"I'm sorry," Cal said simply, while Jackson Stake masked his features by worrying a plug of chewing tobacco. Something in his face suggested that the old man himself had not quite got over "that kind o' thing."

"Yep. She sent me out to say that maybe the boy—what is it you call him? Reed, is it? Family name, I suppose?"

"Well, not exactly. Just a sort of notion I had."

"Queer name. Well, that don' matter. She thinks he ought to start to school an' said if there was any

mendin' or anythin' needed to bring it in an' she'd fix it up right away, so's he could start th' smorning."

Cal thought of the busy woman complaining that she could get no help, "not for the soul or sake o' her," and of the glimpse of her heart she had given him yesterday, and of the bigger glimpse her husband had given him now.

"Oh, that's not in the bargain," he managed to say.

"It is if she says so. You don' know her yet. How's he fixed?"

"All right. He has one suit in good shape."

"Well, you better get him up an' take him over to the school th' smorning. Mile an' a half south, straight down the road. Annie Frolic's the teacher, an' I guess she's all right. Don't know myself much about eddication, excep' I wish I had it. Gander'll drive the team awhile, an' you can spell 'im off again when you get back."

Cal found himself framing some words of thanks, but the farmer had moved down the stalls and his voice was raised in loud criticism of Grit Wilson. A shoulder scald on one of Grit's horses seemed to be the occasion. Cal slipped out quietly to awaken Reed.

The morning sun was pouring through the window in the eastern end of the granary. Its beams fell on the tire with the blow-out and filled the room with a faint but pungent smell of rubber. On the bed in the corner, beneath a heap of blankets, lay the boy. One little foot, protruding from under the rumpled mass, bore its own dark evidence of the previous day's journeyings in the dusty field; one arm, thrown upwards, fell open-palmed across his forehead, the little finger linked in a flirting curl of hair; two ruddy lips, slightly parted in the sleep of childhood, disclosed the flash of white teeth through their smiles. Cal, leaning

over him, paused for a moment in the clutch of a great poignancy; it was at wholly unexpected times like this that some tremendous thing about the boy reached up around his heart and crushed from him just one word —Celesta! . . . Dim-eyed he saw the little figure through the mists of his dead mother's tragedy; dim-eyed he followed him down the eight wonderful years of his young life; down to Jackson Stake's farm and the old Ford cushions in the granary. . . .

"Come, old Indian; time to roll out," he said, shaking himself free of his mood. "School today! Roll out!"

Breakfast was another hurried meal. All meals in the farmhouse, it seemed, were hurried; ample and hurried. There had been the same splashing in the wash basin by the rain barrel; the same single filing into the table; the same "digging in." This time it was into porridge and milk, fried potatoes and eggs, white bread and corn syrup. If Mrs. Stake had had a good night's rest, or no night's rest, she gave no sign; her pace was exactly what it had been the day before, and the day before that, and would be tomorrow, and the day after that. The same white table in the centre of the floor; the same succession of hungry mouths; yesterday, today, and forever.

The first maze of strangeness having worn off, Cal's eyes began to note the details of the house. The room in which they sat was large and square, and seemed to occupy half of the ground floor, which was cut through the middle by a stairway enclosed in partitions. Beyond those partitions, through an open door, came a glimpse of what was evidently the fine room of the house; a corner of a stiff, upholstered chair, with dangly crimson furbelows dropping almost to the floor, and an enlarged crayon portrait of some ancestral being hang-

ing on the wall, were all the aperture commanded. The floor of the room in which they sat was covered with linoleum; traces of its gaudy pattern, which had long since disappeared about the table and the stove, still blazed up cheerily from the less trampled corners. The walls and ceiling were of plaster, one time white, but now stained from yellow to grey in token of many a culinary accident on the kitchen range. The door was in the east, a window in the south, another in the west. Red roller blinds, of a substance broadly suggestive of the linoleum under-foot, hung in the windows, their bareness sheathed by cheap cotton curtains which had taken on something of the yellow-grey color of the walls. A poster announcement of the previous year's Brandon fair and a new calendar from the Plainville Garage, evidently intended to relieve the dullness of the walls, had precisely the opposite effect. The furniture consisted of the long board table in the centre of the room; the steel range with its numerous nickeled parts ruefully awaiting a polishing rub; the wood-box, half filled with split poplar and crowned with a shelf and water-pails; the bright red cream separator in the corner, suggestive of a newly-painted hydrant; a cupboard of shelves papered with ancient copies of the Plainville *Progress,* and supporting an assortment of dishes and utensils; six chairs, including one without a back, allotted to Reed; a sewing machine; a shelf with an alarm clock, and Hamilton Stake's bicycle.

The occupants of the room were not less interesting and practical. Jackson Stake, coatless and vestless, and with trousers still precariously clinging to his broken suspenders, occupied the arm chair at the end of the table. His hair, now mostly grey, and thinning out on top, had once been red, and there was still an auburn hue to the pepper-and-salt of his moustache; his

eyes were keen and grey under bristly brows; his mouth large and genial; his cheeks swarthy; his neck creased and furrowed; his hands—one would not speak of Jackson Stake's hands, one would say his fists. His figure favored corpulence and his ample body showed threatening symptoms of overflowing the taut waistline of his blue overalls. He gave the impression of being aimiable and willing to talk had not the more urgent business of breakfast intervened. On his right sat Gander Stake, lanky and swan-like, with a thin face that sunburned yellow instead of red, a tremendously busy Adam's apple, dark hair plastered to place with water, and eyes that were blue, not grey. He, too, was coatless and vestless, and even while sitting he would give his body an occasional hitch as though to reassure his overalls. Across the table from Gander sat Grit Wilson, also without coat or vest, and with yesterday's whisker grown one day older and sandier. A parenthesis of wrinkles about his mouth and chin agreeably conceded that for him the first bloom of youth was gone, never to return; but his deep brown eyes had the mischievous twinkle of perennial boyhood.

Then there was Hamilton Stake—"Hamburger Stake," as he was called in fun—square and fair and sandy like his father, with curly copper hair and a dash of ruddy down across his upper lip. His face was clean and his teeth were white, and he wore a necktie in concession to the burning of his heart for Elsie Fyfe. His unruly locks would comb into no permanent position, although he spent many a clandestine moment in the attempt; his overalls would bag at the knees although he folded them carefully under his mattress every night. A serio-comic smile played about his lips and captivated Cal, now that he saw it clearly. He must cultivate the acquaintance of Hamilton Stake.

Cal was aroused from his inventory-taking by the discovery that, one by one, the objects of it had left the table. Mrs. Stake had poured a second helping of syrup into Reed's plate and was silently watching him gather it up on thick fragments of bread. Glancing up suddenly Cal startled within her eyes a strange look of hunger.

"I reckon that's his best suit," she said, trying to cover her confusion with speech. "It won' last long at school. I useta say to my boys that school suits should be made o' leather. Jackson, in partic'lar, was awful hard on clo'es. . . How old did you say he was?"

"Eight—nine in September."

Mrs. Stake cleared a corner of the table and her throat simultaneously. It seemed she had a pesky tickle in her throat.

"Spring weather, I blame it on. Always like that in May. . . You mus' be a good boy for Annie Frolic. Do as she bids you, an' work hard at your lessons. It's the wind, the May wind—Was your sister married long; I mean—"

She stopped, realizing the indelicacy of her question, and in the momentary pause Cal recovered his balance.

"Not long; Reed was the only child," he equivocated.

"Well, we mus' get him off," she exclaimed, as, seeking safety in action, she drew Reed on to the floor before her. Her fingers were trifling with his tie; her old knees seemed pressing hungrily against his; her hands were smoothing his riotous hair into some semblance of order. . . .

Cal walked with Reed to school. They went out on the winding trail among the groves of poplar and willow, still sparkling and fragrant with dew, and turned south on the main road. Across a black ploughed

field, now faintly tinged with green, lay a cluster of white-washed farm buildings, probably the homestead of Fraser Fyfe. To the left they could see Gander's four-horse team and seeder, with Gander himself hitching along behind, as he drove his slow shuttle back and forth. Further afield faint spirals of dust against a sky as clear as spring water marked the progress of Grit Wilson and Hamilton Stake.

They swung along cheerily, Reed with his noonday lunch wrapped in the current issue of the Plainville *Progress;* Cal with his thoughts busy over the favorable turn their prospects had taken. There was occasion for cheerfulness. He had literally motored into a job, and not only a job, but a home for himself and Reed. Over what the old farmer would say when he discovered that the bargain supposed to have been made in Plainville was the creature of Cal's imagination—provided the old farmer was under any delusion—Cal allowed himself no uneasiness. Sufficient to the day. It was enough that in twenty-four hours he and Reed had become members of the family. It was enough that Reed had captured the heart of the stern and overworked Mrs. Jackson Stake. The fiddling with his neck-tie—Cal was not blind. It was enough that Big Jim had muzzled his shoulder playfully that morning while he curried his mane. It was enough that the sun shone and the birds twittered as they hopped along the barbed wire fences that bordered the road and that the yellow buttercups glimpsed up shyly out of the green grass, and that little dribbles and shreds of a whistled tune fell from Reed's pursed lips as he jogged along by the side of his "Daddy X." It was enough.

As they crested a low ridge they caught sight of the school, a rectangular wooden building studded with windows on its northern side, and standing back a

short distance from the road. It seemed to have been painted once upon a time, but wind and weather had taken their toll. The door stood open, and when Cal and Reed looked in they could at first distinguish nothing in the comparative gloom. A cool dampness greeted their nostrils. Rows of wooden seats emerged from the darkness, and presently they discerned a young woman at the end of the room, her back to them, her arm raised in the act of writing on the blackboard. If she was aware of their presence she gave no sign, until at length Cal, in his deepest bass, addressed her.

"Good morning, Teacher. How about a new pupil this morning?"

She turned with a start, dropping the chalk to the floor.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Beach. You will think me very rude. I thought it was some of my children. And is this Reed, whom I have been hearing about?"

" 'Mr. Beach?' " thought Cal to himself. " 'Reed, whom I have been hearing about.' Our fame precedes us."

She took Reed's hand first, and then Cal's, and it struck Cal that their welcome seemed to be somewhat in the ratio of their ages. He had a glimpse of blue eyes, with thin, telltale puckers about them; fluffy hair; clean, sharp features, somewhat older than they would care to confess; a spare, light figure, rectangular like the school house and the school grounds and the quarter section which accommodated them. There was chalk dust on her hair and it may have been chalk dust on her face.

"I have always heard that country school teachers are very wonderful," said Cal, when she seemed waiting for him to speak. "It is all true. How did you know my name, and his?"

There was a light dancing in her eye that was not bad to see. "Oh, that's easy. You know, we have rural telephones. They are a great invention."

"Then Mrs. Stake telephoned you?"

"No, she didn't. I see you are curious. I thought only girls were curious?"

Cal summed her up as a little witch. Very well.

"I offer no apology for being curious—about you," he said.

There was a light dancing in her eye that was rather good to see.

"How nice!" she chattered. "Then I'll tell you. Last night, between eight and nine, Hamilton Stake called up Elsie Fyfe for their usual bedtime confab. About the same time I tried to call Elsie, and found the line busy, so I listened in. Oh, don't be shocked. We all do it, although we don't all admit it. I wasn't the only one; I could tell that by the quiet lifting of receivers. You get to know it, with practice. Shall I tell you what the community knows this morning about you and Reed?"

"I am mildly interested," he admitted, noting that there was really a curve to her throat, in defiance of her general rectangular plan. A rather pleasant curve, it was. And her eyes were full of fun, or something.

"The community knows that you are Cal Beach, that you come from the East, that you're green as grass, that you've been through university, and that Jackson Stake is trying you out and will perhaps keep you on for the season if you attend to your knitting and don't get an idea that because you've been to college you know more than anybody else, meaning in particular Hamilton Stake, Gander Stake, and Grit Wilson, in the order named."

"All very interesting—and very accurate," Cal admitted. "What else?"

"The community knows that Reed is eight years old, and your sister's son, and that he has a funny name, and that Mother Stake had taken quite a shine to him."

"Our young friend is observant, Miss Frolic. By the way, speaking of funny names—?"

Her eyes narrowed a little under his gaze, but the light in them danced eagerly. "My name is Frawdic, F-r-a-w-d-i-c," she explained. "An odd name, and it's easier to listen to their mispronouncing of it than to correct them. And 'Frolic' is a rather pleasing appellation, don't you think?"

"An appropriate one, perhaps," he bantered.

"Who knows?" she said, and momentarily dropped her eyes.

The children were beginning to gather for school. They came barefooted, and some of them without coats, and swinging over their shoulders bags with their school books and lunches. The visitor was an object of their curiosity, and one or two of the bolder boys edged up close enough to hear the conversation. But Miss Frawdic proved to be something of a diplomatist.

"Here, Harold," she called to the boy who had come closest. "This is a new pupil. His name is Reed. Take him away and get him started playing with the other boys. Start a ball game. You have twenty minutes yet until school time."

Harold looked Reed up and down for a moment. "C'mon," he said. Reed followed, somewhat shyly, but in a few minutes his voice was coming from the ball ground as loud as any.

The teacher was in no hurry to resume her work at the blackboard, and Cal had a feeling that as Gander

had managed without him successfully for some twenty-three years he would probably get along for another morning. He waited.

"Oh, I forgot to ask Reed's other name," said Miss Frawdic, as though groping for a subject.

"Beach," said Cal.

"Beach? That's *your* name, isn't it? And he's your sister's son?"

The eyes with the shallow furrows about them were now looking into his, quizzically. Cal resented them just a little. He had no intention of being cross-questioned by Annie Frawdic, nor yet of lying to evade her curiosity. "His name is Beach," he said.

She lapsed into an appropriate silence. But it was for a moment only. Annie Frawdic had no thought of allowing any unpleasantness to develop between herself and the community's latest acquisition. The shadow in her eyes was as temporary as that of a flying cloud upon the prairies.

"We are so glad to have you," she rattled. "You know—a university man. We are all such dubs."

"Oh, not all, I am sure," said Cal, gallantly.

"Yes, all. You soon get that way. 'Like as iron sharpeneth iron,' you know. I know I have grown very dull for lack of a—a—"

"A whetstone," Cal suggested.

"Exactly—a whetstone. Take care I don't call you Mr. Whetstone."

They were progressing.

With a slim toe she described a circle in the dust on the floor. She was waiting for him to speak, so he spoke a platitude:

"It must be wonderful to teach these bright-eyed children; to see them growing up under your guidance, your counsel."

"It isn't. It's a bore, to them and to me. They come to school because they can't help themselves. I teach them for the same reason."

Her frankness was engaging. If she had said, "I am teaching school because I have failed to land a husband," he could not have understood her better. He wondered how far she would go.

"Never give up," he said.

Her eyes narrowed a trifle, but there was no anger in them. She described another circle with her toe on the floor. As it happened the circles interlinked each other.

"You have been in Plainville?" she queried, presently.

"No."

"Then you have not seen Minnie?"

"You mean Miss Stake?"

"I hope not," she said, punning on the name. "Still, it's a mistake that might be excused."

Cal did not answer. He remembered the uncanny way in which gossip swept through the community, and he had a mental picture of receivers being silently lifted and greedy ears strained forward to catch what Jackson Stake's new man had said about Minnie. . . .

"Nine o'clock!" Miss Frawdic exclaimed. "I must call the children." She extended her hand and took his in a friendly grip. The bones of her thin hand were sharp and firm against his palm.

"I will do the best I can for Reed," she said.

Cal turned from the door to take Reed in his arms. "Make good, old Indian; make good!" he whispered in his ear, and gave him an affectionate shake. He waved a friendly arm to the children now trooping into the school, and turned up the road to Jackson Stake's. As

he walked he tried to turn the conversation over in his mind. And it always came back to this:

"What was it she said about Minnie? Something about a mistake that might be excused. Funny girl. Strange girl. I mean Annie Frolic. Good name. Well, we shall see."

CHAPTER SIX

THE week went on tremendously. Up at five every morning; filling mangers and oat-boxes while the horses nodded and jerked in great gestures of approval; cleaning stables hot with the animal vapors of the night; currying and brushing manes and flanks and fetlocks; cuffing Big Jim as he curled his great upper lip in mock savagery; buckling the harness to place; running a hand affectionately under the collar to make sure it sat comfortably against the great and willing shoulder, while the sunlight poured through the open door and touched with gold a million dust-planets floating in its yellow wedge—such was the ritual of consecrating a new day to the service of Man. Then the splash at the corner of the house; the grateful solace of cold rain water; the caress of prairie breezes where the shirt neck, turned down for washing, exposed a skirt of white skin under the jacket of tan; the lungs bulging, the muscles vibrant, the appetite on edge!

Breakfast; the tired woman moving mechanically back and forth as inexorably as the inexorable machine in which she had been caught; the horses again in Company on Parade, jingling their bits and stamping their big, flat feet; the procession to the fields, and the seeder shuttle up and down, up and down, up and down. After the first day Cal had found himself intrusted with the seeder; Gander had no jealousies when a distribution of the farm labor was being made, and nothing pleased Cal better than to take a little more than

his share. Gander had christened him "D.D." in acknowledgment of his university training, and the sobriquet threatened to stick, but if there had been any contempt in it at first it was quickly giving place to more friendly sentiments. Gander had complimented him generously, driving the compliment home with the declaration that he "never would have reckoned a D.D. could catch on so quick." He "reckoned" further that perhaps no one was quite hopeless, provided he was fortunate enough to fall into good hands at the start.

Every hour of the day had its own peculiar witchery, but it was to five o'clock in the afternoon that Cal learned to look forward with greatest anticipation. By five o'clock Reed would be home from school and come skipping across the fields with tell-tale traces of Mother Stake's great bread-and-jam sandwiches hanging tenaciously to his cheeks. It seemed to Cal that never before had he measured the grip the boy had taken about his heart. Their constant association during six weeks of gipsying with "Antelope" had built up a chumship the strength of which he had not realized until these daily periods of separation. Always the boy had been to him the living representation of Celesta, and had been loved, perhaps, on her account, but now he was laying strange claims upon his guardian's heart in right and title of his own.

But into Reed's life had suddenly come a new object of affection. It happened on the second day on the farm that as the boy returned from school he encountered on the road where it wound among the poplar groves a very brown and very curly and very bright-eyed spaniel. Only for a moment did they regard each other with misgivings, and then the dog, pouncing upon Reed, licked him a lavish welcome. Reed, to protect his face, wrapped his arms about the shaggy

shoulders, and the two went down in a wrestle together, rolling and tumbling about on the grass. They formed friendship in that moment, and raced off to the house to proclaim their discoveries.

"Trix is a bad dog," said Mrs. Stake, reprovingly. "A bad, harum-scarum dog. The way she goes gala-vantin' over the country—I declare, it's not respectable."

Flat on the floor, with chops resting on her extended paws and eyes closed to the merest twinkle, the spaniel gravely accepted her rebuke. Her demeanor was that of one who confessed it all and was not quite ashamed.

"If you'd been home like a good dog you'd ha' met Reed yesterday," her mistress continued. "But no, you mus' be away scourin' the neighborhood, an' in no good company at that, I'll be bound. Now be off with you—both o' you!" But as she ordered them off she was spreading a great bread-and-jam sandwich, and neither Reed nor Trix was so foolish as to take her immediately at her word.

The rush of strange, new work had sadly interrupted the bed-time stories. When supper was over and the horses "done up" for the night Cal was ready to drag his weary limbs to the cushions and blankets in the corner of the granary. In those first days all the horse power of his engines was needed to drive the physical machine; nothing was left for romantic adventures. But soon he hardened to his work; soon the work became mainly automatic, leaving his mental reserves almost untouched, and after three days of coma he again began to think. It was then he became somewhat startled by the ease with which one can get out of the way of thinking. Gander, and Grit, for example; it was quite apparent they didn't think. Their minds trudged around in a deep-grooved circle, like a

captive bear around a post; rarely climbing to the top of the post for an observation; never excursioning into the vast unknown that lay just beyond the circle. To them there was no unknown; the world lay complete within their deep-grooved circle; complete and fully comprehended. Everything was simple, and, for the most part, satisfactory, and to be contemplated with amiable acquiescence. No sleepy bear amid his bones was more content than they; no scientist, searching heaven and earth for truth, was half so wise. Their contempt for Cal's university education was not assumed; it was genuine, and without even the saving flavor of a tinge of envy. The sting of it was not mitigated by its obvious good nature, or by the fact that, if Cal was now rising somewhat in their opinion, it was in spite of, not because of, his scholarship. Cal almost frightened himself with the question whether it might be that he, too, would presently find all the universe within his circle, and plod it with the unconscious pathos of Gander and Wilson. At all costs he must save himself from that; he must save his soul alive. The first thing was to resume the bed-time stories for the boy. He would begin again Saturday evening.

Saturday evening, just after supper, Hamilton Stake waylaid Cal. He had as yet had scarcely any conversation with Hamilton, for no particular reason except that they worked in different fields and did not come much in contact. Such impression as he had had had been favorable, so when Hamilton strolled with overacted casualness into the granary where Cal was spreading blankets after their day's airing he welcomed him heartily.

"'Lo, Ham; come along. What do you think of my diggins? Some boudoir, eh?"

"Pretty nifty," Hamilton agreed, a bashful smile

playing across his clean, fair face. "Never would 'a' thought you could make this old dog-house look like home, but it does."

Cal sensed a note in the boy's voice quite different from anything in Gander's or Grit's. There was appreciation in it; something, perhaps, not far removed from admiration, in it.

"A little touch of art, you know," said Cal, off-handedly, "makes all the difference between—between an animal and a man."

Ham did not answer, but subjected the tire with the blow-out to an unnecessarily exhaustive inspection. Presently:

"I was wondering if you'd mind helping me out a bit to-night."

"Sure. If I can. What is it?"

"I was wondering if you'd mind feeding up for me. Gander's gone to town with Dad's car, and I don't like asking Grit."

Cal glanced at him quizzically. He noted that the ruddy down had disappeared from the upper lip; that the curly copper hair was parted as well as its turbulent nature would permit; that the neck of a clean shirt was neatly drawn together with a new and glorious tie and bayoneted in place with a diamond pin which, if genuine, would have been worth about a thousand dollars. And as Cal's own lips parted in a smile the boy's parted in response, and they were friends.

"Sure, I'll feed up," said Cal. "And you might give my regards to Miss Elsie."

"You're wise," the boy grinned. "And you're white," he added, and was gone. Something very much like a lump came in Cal's throat as he thought of that short but all-comprehensive tribute.

As he was feeding the horses Jackson Stake came

into the stable and regarded him silently for a minute.

"You doin' up Ham's?" he commented. "Don' let that young gaffer put nothin' over on you. He'd be at Double F's mornin', noon, an' night if some one would do his work at home. I sort o' suspec' he's gonna marry the whole family one o' these days. Couldn't possibly have it that bad over one or two."

Cal felt that this was hardly a matter for his discussion. "Ham's all right," he ventured. "Good clean boy. You should be proud of him."

Jackson Stake's straight figure seemed to straighten more where he stood between the stalls. "Dang it, I *am* proud of him," he declared. "We all get our bumps an' I've got mine, but I reckon on Ham as one o' my compensations. An' Elsie's all right, too. Good as gold. I'm not kickin' if you ain't."

It struck Cal that his employer's process of thought was capable of cutting some sharp corners. And he wondered what particular bump Jackson Stake had in mind. Minnie? Perhaps. Then:

"Would you object to a small camp fire in the yard, beside the granary, these nights?"

"Camp fire? What for? You ain't cold, are ye? There's an old stove——"

"No—no. Not cold. It's just a sort of notion. When we were traveling together Reed and I used to build a camp fire every night, and we thought it would be nice to have one here, if you don't mind. I'd go out and cut extra wood for it——"

"If the kid wants a fire he can have it," said Jackson Stake, decisively. "Dangdest thing, the way that boy twists Susie 'round his finger! Only be sure to put it out—clean out."

"Thanks," said Cal.

The sun was almost down when Cal had finished

with his work, but the news of a camp fire and a story sent Reed and Trix scampering with delight. They built it on a bare spot a short distance from the granary, and carried out the Ford cushions so that they could sit about it in comfort. Although there was fuel for the taking at the woodpile they preferred to gather dry branches among the poplars; it made the fire more realistic, and when the flames were crackling and the ruddy glow flickering on the granary wall they were again gentlemen adventurers unafraid.

Reed gathered up his feet, with his arms about his ankles, and the red firelight painting his face. "All right, Daddy X," he said. "Let 'er go."

"Once upon a time," Cal began, "the gopher used to bark like a dog. That was long before the first Old Timer came to the prairies, and the gophers had only themselves to bark at, and sometimes a coyote or a fox. The coyote and the fox, and the big hawk that sometimes hung overhead, were their enemies, and when they were near Father Gopher stayed close to the hole he had dug in the soft, warm earth, and made Mrs. Gopher and the baby gophers keep out of sight until danger was over. Sometimes Father Gopher would stand straight as a stick on the little mound of earth at the door of his home and pretend not to see the great hawk poising overhead. Then with a sudden swoop the hawk would come at him with the speed of an express train, but Father Gopher had not been asleep, and just as the cruel talons were about to close on him he would dart under cover, chuckling and laughing. And Mother Gopher would scold him for his rashness, and ask him to think what would become of the children if anything should happen him, but I think she was proud of her brave husband just the same, and it made her heart glow in her little breast to think how daring

he was, and how he could make sport of their great enemy, the hawk.

"It was the same with the coyote and the fox; they thought themselves very clever indeed, but Father Gopher was more than a match for them. When they would hide from him behind the clump of willows he would bark, like they did, but if they stole nearer he would slip into his burrow and through the thin brown grass his small beady eyes would watch their every movement. It was a clever fox or coyote that could get the better of Father Gopher.

"But he had two enemies that were worthy to be feared, and, curiously enough, they were called Fatty and Skinny. One was Fatty the Badger, who, with his great flat back filling all the space in the buffalo path in which he loved to travel, seemed harmless enough. But Fatty had more than a big back; he had wonderful long claws on his short little legs, and not another animal on the plains could make the earth fly like he could when he started to dig. It was a bad day for any gopher when Fatty Badger took it into his thick little head to dig him out. There was only one thing to do, and that was to move house at once, and as every wise gopher has a back door as well as a front door, and sometimes little private passages to his neighbors' homes as well, Fatty Badger seldom had more than exercise for his trouble. But it is a sad thing to see a home destroyed, and Mother Gopher and the children were always in tears when they heard the great claws rasping in the earth above them.

"The worst enemy of all was Skinny Weasel, for he was long and thin, and a terrible fighter, and could come right down the hole, and he never knocked at the door like a gentleman, but rushed right in, and Father Gopher could only make the best fight he could in the

hope that his wife and children would escape by the back door while he was selling his life dearly at the front one."

"That is terrible," said Reed.

"Yes, isn't it? The prairies seemed to be full of the enemies of Father Gopher, all stronger and greater fighters than he. And yet he prospered and multiplied more than all his enemies, because he lived upon the fruit of the soil and not by preying upon other people. But one day his two very greatest enemies appeared on the scene. They were a man and a dog. Father Gopher had never seen them before, and, because he is very curious, he watched them with great interest, thinking that such wonderful big creatures would not trouble a little gopher who lived only on grass and seeds. But suddenly the dog rushed upon him, with great loud barks, louder and lustier than the biggest coyote Father Gopher had ever heard. Father Gopher was almost caught before he could rush into his hole. He was so excited and out of breath that he tumbled in upon Mother Gopher and the children and could hardly speak. Then they heard the great claws digging, just like Fatty Badger, and they were in a dreadful panic, because if they ran out at the back door the man would be sure to catch them. But just as it seemed their end had come—they could hear the sniffing of a great nose within a foot of their home—the man whistled on the dog, and he pulled his head out and ran away."

"Good!" said Reed. "I was afraid he was going to get 'em."

"Yes, so was I. But the dog ran away when the man whistled, and Father Gopher plucked up his courage and followed along in a little path which his own people had made in the grass, and he noticed that every

little while the man whistled and then the dog would run to him. And he said to himself, 'If I could whistle like that the dog would obey me as he obeys the man.' So he stood up and tried, and he found that he could whistle almost as loud as a man, and ever since then the gopher has whistled instead of barking."

They sat in silence when the story was finished. Darkness had settled down; the little fire glowed gipsy-like before them; whiffs of its fragrant smoke fondled about their faces and tickled their nostrils with its feathery pungency. They had been so interested that the approach of an automobile to the house had been unheard, and Cal was not prepared for a girlish voice almost at his elbow.

"Interesting—if true," the voice remarked, and Cal sprang to his feet.

She was standing a step or two away from them, somewhat in the shadow of the granary, and the dull glow from the fire limned her figure only in the vague and suggestive way which is the gift of art. Indeed, as it afterwards seemed to Cal, all he saw was her face and head, and imagination filled in the figure as it does in those clever illustrations for advertisements which have been much in vogue. But it was her face he saw, pink and ruddy and well made, with lips half parted in a bantering smile. . . . No, it was her eyes he saw, deep and brown glowing. No, it was her hair, bronze hair surely, trapping and teasing the ruddy light——

"I'm Minnie," she said simply, and held out her hand. "May I join your party? I'm really not so bad mannered as I seem."

It was a hard remark to answer. Cal mumbled something about being sure of that, which, of course, was not the right thing to say at all, and the girl

sat down on the cushion beside Reed. "I know all about you, little man," she said, slipping her arm around him. "Shall we be friends?"

"Yes," said the child, soberly, "but you'll have to be friends with Daddy X, too."

"Daddy X?"

"That's my nickname," Cal hastened to say, anxious to avoid any lengthy explanations.

"Then it's a bargain," she answered. She was facing the boy, but Cal had a feeling the words were intended for him. There was something unaccountably pleasant in that presumption.

"I really didn't intend to 'listen in,' " she continued, turning toward him. "Gander brought me home in the car, and when I came out to get some groceries which I had left in it I saw the fire by the granary, so I rambled down. Then I found there was serious business on hand, so I didn't interrupt. Of course Gander told me about you. He said you were a D.D."

"I'm not, really," Cal answered. "The initials after my name—if I cared to use them—would stand for something quite different from Doctor of Divinity. What else had our friend Gander to report?"

She had crossed her ankles and was pointing her shapely toes to the fire. Cal noted the low shoes, the silk stockings, the fashionably cut skirt. She rubbed a small heel in the earth, but she did not answer.

In the glow from the fire the profile of her face was cut as clean as a cameo between Cal and the darkness. "What else did Gander report?" he repeated.

"It was quite favorable," she said, after a silence. "Shall I tell you? He said he reckoned if you stuck around for a while it wouldn't be so hard to keep Sister Minnie on the farm."

Her confession brought her face toward him with a laugh, and suddenly Cal knew it was her eyes that he had seen in that first glimpse through the darkness.

"Let us hope Gander is a good prophet," he said, and they laughed together.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUNDAY morning was a time for rest, and Cal slept late. It was seven when he awoke from a sleep strangely but pleasantly haunted by visions of a beautiful maiden who had a disconcerting habit of thrusting her stockinged feet in the fire. At the cost of shattering some proprieties Cal gently but firmly averted the danger. It was a particularly engaging kind of heroism, this rescuing of silk-stockinged feet with a beautiful maiden attached, and he had something of a grievance at the sunlight when, pouring in through the window, it interrupted his gallant occupation.

Cal drew on his clothes and stretched himself at the granary door. The sunshine filled the yard like a flood, and the air filled his lungs like a bellows. The world was singing a morning psalm of peace, and a lilt in his heart beat accompaniment. Matronly hens were taking their dust bath by the side of the stables while their younger sisters cackled over belated layings in the hay shed, and as Cal crossed the yard the family sow turned from sunning herself by the water trough to greet him with an amiable grunt. But at the stable Old Jim cast him a look of reproach. For an hour he had been snuffing and nibbling in his empty manger, and he felt righteously aggrieved. It was not until he had been fed and curried, and left unharnessed, that the big bay seemed to remember what day it was, and took to a friendly nodding of a mouth broadly whiskered with hay. Plainly Jim was a believer in Sunday observance.

When he had finished with his horses Cal turned toward the water barrel at the house for his morning ablutions, but in the yard he was arrested by a sound of singing, accompanied by a drone faintly suggestive of distant bagpipes. It seemed to come from one of the smaller stables to which his duties had not yet taken him. After a moment of irresolution he turned toward it, and found an even more humble building than that which housed the horses; the chinks had fallen out in many places and the door hung only by one tenacious hinge. Inside were cows, four of them, with necks bracketed to their mangers, and a girl seated at one, streaming industrious white ribbons of milk into a tin pail which rang its reverberations now partly smothered in creamy froth. She was singing, and for a moment he did not disturb her. He was watching the rounded, rising muscles of her arms, the quick action of her slender wrists, the warm curve of her ear——

"Music hath charms!" he quoted, inanely, when he felt that he must announce himself.

She stopped and regarded him for a moment. "Yes, hasn't it?" she agreed, and resumed her milking.

It was true, then, that her hair was bronze; certain audacious threads, peeking out from beneath her milking cap, confirmed it.

He was wishing he could help her milk. After all, what avails it to write the prize thesis on "The Reaction of Industrialism Upon the Rural Social Atmosphere" if one has not learned to milk? He said so, but not in such language. "I am afraid my education has been neglected," he explained.

"Don't pity yourself," she advised him. "A first-class farm hand never milks."

So he was a farm hand. All right. He was above

being hurt by being called a farm hand. Besides, he *was* a farm hand.

"But why?" he asked.

"Because milking is drudgery. The experienced farm hand always lays it down that he can't milk and has no intention of learning. It's only the greenhorn who says, 'No, I can't milk, but I'd like to learn'."

Evidently Miss Minnie could give him some pointers, and was not averse.

"But why? These mild-eyed cows; that creamy pail. Why?"

She was stripping the last drops between finger and thumb. Then setting her pail to one side—he rushed forward to take it from her hand—she arose, showing a pinned-up skirt and a fragment of feminine attire commonly regarded as obsolete, lifted up her stool, patted Bossie on the flank, and stepped out.

"There!" she said, as one who had just had a considerable weight pleasantly lifted from her mind. "That's that."

"Finished?"

"Finished."

She turned to another full pail, which he had not seen. He took up both in his strong arms, never stronger than on this happy Sunday morning, and together they walked toward the house.

"You asked why," she said, picking up the thread of his thought. "I'll tell you. You've seen the film, 'Why Girls Leave Home?' "

"Don't know that I have."

"Why, I thought you city men— It's been at the Plainville Electric Theatre. *Some* theatre, let me say. A sort of tunnel with a sheet at one end and a ticket box at the other. Well, I could write a scenario for a

film, 'Why Country Girls Leave Home,' and I'd use only one actor."

"Who?"

"A cow. A herd of cows. That's why."

Her remark opened up a new avenue of speculation. By no stretch of the imagination had cows, common domestic cows, female *Bovina,* appeared within the scope of the university curriculum touching sociology. And now—

He had much to say, but before any of it had been said they were at the house.

"What do you do with it now?" he asked, helplessly.

"Run it through the separator. You can turn it for me, if you like."

He liked, and a minute later the whine of the cream separator rose above the volcanic bubbling of the porridge on the range and the clatter of Mrs. Stake's table-setting. With something akin to fascination Cal watched the little rivulet of cream trickling out of its long slender spout into the receptacle placed for it, while presently his arms cramped to the ache of a strange exercise and the sweat began to gather on his face.

"My land, you might let the man have his Sunday rest," Mrs. Stake protested.

Cal wondered who supplied the horsepower for this machine on week days. Certainly not Gander, nor Hamilton. It boiled itself down to Jackson Stake or his wife. Perhaps, in days gone by, Minnie; the girl was strong of bicep, he could see that—

The men were filing in for breakfast. The slumbering chuckle in Grit Wilson's eyes leaped to flame at sight of Cal turning the separator; then instantly died down again. A new note from the whirling bowl, a

sort of throaty growl as compared with its tight, high-pitched whine, proclaimed the task finished, and, at a signal from Minnie, Cal released the handle, which dropped inert to the lowest point of its circle while the machine itself coasted joyously along, like Antelope with the clutch out on a down grade.

"Thank you," she said, simply, in a voice to reach him alone, and he went to his seat more than repaid. What cared he for the mocking eyes of Grit Wilson? What, indeed! No more than for the peripatetic functioning of Gander's Adam's apple, more obvious than usual against the background of a recent shave and a clean collar!

After breakfast they turned the horses free for exercise, and the drove, with Big Jim at their head and Reed and Trixie bringing up the rear, set out on a sedate trot around the pasture field. The trot steadily gathered momentum, and when Grit's big grey thought to slip ahead of Jim on a corner it broke into a gallop, and ended with a flourish of tails and stamping at the pasture gate. Then were many rollings on the warm grass, and heavings of great hoofs and fetlocks in the air, and prodigious scratchings of vertebral ridge-poles on the sandy earth.

The forenoon was spent in congenial laziness. Cal, drawing upon the warm water reservoir at the back of the kitchen range, and requisitioning an iron wash-tub that lay upturned in the yard before the house, sought the privacy of his granary for a bath, and marvelled at the evidences of honest toil which the residue in the tub afforded. He shaved with more care than usual, selected clean shirt, underwear, and socks from his somewhat limited wardrobe, parted his hair with military exactitude, and superintended similar operations,

sans the shaving, on the part of Reed. Then he sallied forth, conquering and to conquer.

There was no sign of Minnie, so he rambled about the stables. On the sunny side of one of the buildings he came upon Grit and Gander lounging in the warm sand.

"We was jus' sayin'," said Grit, through the clenched teeth that held his pipe; "we was jus' sayin' you ought to rig up the old Ford to run that milk buzzer. That shouldn't be hard for a man with a eddication."

"For a D. D.," Gander expanded the description.

Cal sat down with them, hunched his back against the sunny wall, and got out his pipe. Not until it was drawing well and the peace of tobacco was upon his soul did he take up the theme.

"I'm afraid my education, along practical lines, has been neglected," he said.

"Minnie 'll make up for that," said Gander. "She was givin' you a good start this morning. But take a tip from father, don't get mixed up in this chore bus'ness. There's nothin' to it."

"That's what she said—or words to that effect."

"She did, eh? Well, she's wise. She knows. An' when a man drives a team all day, an' feeds up at night, I'll say he's done a day's work, an' he's through."

"Same here," Mr. Wilson volunteered.

"Sounds reasonable," Cal admitted. "And when a woman feeds a herd of hungry men three times and rids up after them I suppose she's done a day's work, and she's through, too. Is that right?"

Gander took his pipe from his mouth and held it at a non-committal angle. "What are you drivin' at?" he demanded.

"Well, I've only been here a few days, and perhaps

it is too soon to reach conclusions, but my specialty in college was sociology—"

"Wha's that got to do with? Socials, an' free eats? Sounds like a good subject." It was Grit who was commenting. "You'll be ace high when the box social season comes 'round."

"No, it's not exactly that," Cal continued, husbanding his good humor. "I don't know quite how I'd explain it to this audience." He paused, but his irony was too delicate; it was lost upon them. "But the purpose of all education is to teach a man to observe, to think—"

"Poor bus'ness," Grit interrupted. "The biggest trouble I ever got into came from observin'—an' thinkin'." He was for launching into a salacious story, but Cal would not be deflected.

"And my habit of observing and thinking," he continued, "has caused me to take notice that the hardest worked beast of burden on the farm is the farmer's wife. Now that's a tremendous fact. I suppose it has more to do with the movement from the farm to the city than everything else."

Gander contributed a flicker of interest. "What you goin' to do about it?" he inquired.

"I'm going to think about it."

Gander relapsed. Cal, recalling his mental picture, saw the bear get down from the top of his post and resume the plodding of his well-worn circle. The flicker of interest had died in its birth.

But it had not. Suddenly Cal was aware of the germ of an idea burrowing into his consciousness. Leaping from Gander's unreceptive brain it was igniting the combustible material in his own. He knew it for a great moment, and he slipped away, eager for

a solitude in which he might compress the nebula into a solid thought.

In the shade of the granary he evolved it. It was very simple when reduced to terms; it simply meant that here, on the farm of Jackson Stake, he was to take his post-graduate course in sociology. He had put his science away, as a thing to be kept under safe cover while his health was mending, little dreaming that right here was the environment in which he could best develop it, and the raw material for his experiments. This prairie homestead, prosperous, no doubt, in a gross kind of way, in the kind of way that is measured by acres and bushels and droves of stock, with its rough buildings, its simple customs, its labors, its drudgeries, its flickers of humor, its pathetic shadows, its unconscious tragedy—this was to be the school of his post-graduation. What characters, what material to his hand! Jackson Stake, himself a broad-girthed boy of sixty; Susie Stake, a domestic treadmill, but a treadmill with a heart, and a heart which, in some unaccounted way, had been set pounding again by the presence of the boy Reed; Gander and Grit, all-wise and self-sufficient; Hamilton, deep in the happy embarrassment of his love for Elsie Fyfe; even Reed, a strange light from out of the darkness—what subject matter for his study! And Minnie. A gust of reaction swept him at the thought of including Minnie in his investigations; of impaling her as a rare specimen and subjecting her to the microscopic scrutiny of the eye of science. Yet not the least of the material to his hand was she, and science must not be impeded by the clamor of the heart.

As Cal turned these new thoughts in his mind he smiled at the complacent ignorance in which he had written his prize thesis on "The Reaction of Industrial-

ism Upon the Rural Social Atmosphere." Here, now, was no musty text-book; here was life, throbbing, pulsating, grinding, to which the text-book bore no closer relationship than does the photograph to the living soul.

It was too tremendous to be taken standing, and Cal sought poise in the prairie fields. Fancy injecting idealism into this clay; substituting art for materialism; living for being alive; implanting an intellectual consciousness; attuning minds to the infinite reactions of Truth; broadening horizons until they included the world, the universe itself! Cal walked the fields by himself, his soul afire with dreams; forgot his midday meal, and came out of his trance only when he discovered that the family was preparing to attend church in the district schoolhouse, that the Dodge was drawn up at the door, and that Minnie was dressed apparently for walking rather than riding.

"Dad will drive, of course," she explained, "and Mother will ride with him. Hamilton is over at Double F's, and you three men will fill the back seat. I don't mind walking; indeed, I don't. I rather like it—"

So Cal said something about liking to walk, too, and with Reed in the back seat it would be crowded, anyway, and it was only a mile and a half, wasn't it? And perhaps they had better start at once. And presently he and Minnie were tracking together the winding trail through the poplar groves to the highroad.

The sun poured down upon them as they walked, and they sought the grass at the side of the road to escape the dust. In his left hand Cal carried his soft hat that he might the better enjoy the breeze which from time to time teased through his hair, but his right swung free and in dangerous proximity to Minnie's left. He had thought he would have much to say,

but they were strangely silent; they had not found a conversational point of contact, and to grope for one seemed too obvious. He caught himself in furtive glances at the trim figure at his side; glances of appraisal; glances that took note of the flirting curls of her bronze hair, of the long lashes over her brown eyes, of the mould of her lips, the curve of her neck, the white V of her bosom, the swing of her limbs, the lilt of her ankle. He told himself he was studying her; that she was a part of his field of investigation. Exhibit A! Absurd. Yet what else? Anything else would be still more absurd.

"I thought perhaps you would want to talk, as well as walk," she said at length. She was master of a sidelong glance charged with menace to the cause of science.

"I do, tremendously," he answered. "Perhaps that is why I can't."

The explanation seemed to satisfy her, and again they walked on in silence.

"At any rate I'm glad—we're all glad—you came," she volunteered when they had crested the knoll that commands the school. "That was why I had to leave the farm."

"I don't understand."

"A girl must have some one to talk to," she told him, frankly. "I felt that I was just—drying up—on the farm. Not that it's so much better in Plainville, but at any rate there's not the drudgery. You haven't talked much yet, but I'm sure you can, and you will. You see, I've been studying you."

Exhibit B! Ah! Well, that was fair, and two could play at it.

At this moment the Dodge swept by them, and other cars were raising their dust-clouds in the dis-

tance. When they came up to the school a little group of farmers was assembled on the shady side of the building, discussing the progress of their seeding and the prospect of rain. A blue-black cloud, already forming in the west, gave point to their prophecies, but their absorption in crops and weather was not so great that they failed to note the young man walking with Minnie Stake, and to encourage certain gentle surmises, more hinted than spoken. As other cars came up other farmers joined the group, while their wives and daughters took seats inside the school.

It may have been quite by accident, but Annie Frawdic was at the door. "Hello, Minnie," she greeted them; "who's your friend?"

"Oh, this is Mr. Beach, Cal Beach, Miss Frolic."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Beach," said Annie, as she extended her hand. Then, while Minnie's head was turned aside for a moment to take note of those who were in the building, she added, *sotto voce,* "For the second time, remember my predictions, and take them as a warning."

And as Cal returned the pressure of her hand, which had not been prematurely withdrawn, he mentally registered—Exhibit C!

CHAPTER EIGHT

CAL found a strange new zest in his labors all that week. The thought that he could combine practical research in sociology—a sort of post-graduate course in his specialty—with the equally practical business of making a livelihood and re-establishing his health was a particularly encouraging and inspiring one. In an instant it drained the drudgery from his toil, revealing those rich social deposits which drudgery so often conceals; it gave purpose to his life; it invested the meanest surrounding with mystery and romance.

He had talked with loosened tongue to Minnie that night, until Gander, with inopportune impatience, had raced his engines to a roar as he awaited her in the car. She had sprung to her feet from the Ford cushion where she had sat at the front of his granary, with a deft hand whipping the dust from the fringe of her skirt as she arose.

"I must go," she had said. "Brothers get in a beastly hurry just when—"

But she stood before him, and did not go. Then—

"Can you drive a Dodge?"

"I can easily learn. It's a little different—"

"You ought to learn. . . . Good night." And she was gone.

That was an idea. That was something to think about. It gave him a pleasurable little thrill of intoxication, like a very light wine. It may have been unscien-

tific, but it was very enjoyable, and he nursed it until he fell asleep.

He must have slept lightly, for he was awakened by the first patter of rain on the shingled roof. It was very dark; so dark he could not see his hand when he raised it before his face. A cool breeze came in through his open window and stirred his workday overalls where they hung from a nail beside his bed; he could hear the suspender buckles rasping lightly against the board wall as they stirred. The few drops of rain which had awakened him lulled and died down, then gathered again for a more determined assault. Pat-a-pat, pat-a-pat, pat-a-pat, like some myriad-footed creature of the night they sprang upon his cedar shingles; he could smell the damp odor of the cedar filtering through the roof and filling his little room. Presently there was a splash of water as it gathered in little pools under his eaves; and always the myriad-footed pat-a-patting on the roof.

Reed stirred in his sleep, projecting a corner of himself into Cal's section of the bed, and Cal gently but firmly unkinked him. With a strong hand he straightened the sturdy little limbs, apparently hopelessly entangled among themselves and fragments of blanket, and pointed them in the direction in which they should be pointed. Then he rested back to the luxury of the rhythm of the rain on the roof; linking his fingers palm-upward on the pillow and nesting his head in the warm junction of his hands, he lay in a quiet ecstasy of spirit that was very new and wonderful. It did not occur to him to question whether that spirit was quite scientific. One question only had fluttered through his semi-consciousness, beating a tattoo on his brain to the accompaniment of the patter on the roof; a vague

wonderment whether or not Minnie had reached Plainville before the rain.

She had. Gander had let her down at Mrs. Goode's boarding house and, his mood of impatience having now given way to that of one who has an amplitude of time, had gone strolling down the streets of the little town in search of such adventure as might be afoot at eleven o'clock of a Sunday evening. It was well after midnight when Minnie heard the shifting of his gears, for the girl was still awake, turning over in her mind the events of a day long to be remembered as eventful. She admitted having become interested in Cal Beach. He was a new type, and she was fond of studying types. It had been the monotony of types, perhaps as much as the cow-drudgery of the farm, which had goaded her to a school of stenography in Winnipeg, from which she had returned to be reimmersed in a monotony of types in the village of Plainville. These farm men, these little-town men, she knew them all; she "had their number," as she confidently assured herself.

This Cal person was different. Perhaps no better, but different. At any rate he could talk; she had found that out. She had prodded him out of his shell as they sat in pleasant proximity on the cushion of the old Ford in front of the granary. She had led him to talk about himself as the easiest angle of attack, and he had told her something of his plans, and of how they had been interrupted by the doctor's edict, and of how he hoped soon to be able to take up again his study of sociology. She remembered how she had laughed when he said he might find the material close at hand, and how she had banteringly inquired if she was to be a subject for investigation, and how he had over-denied it. Well, he was very interesting, and we

should see what we should see. He had not told her much about Reed; rather dried up on the subject of Reed. A winsome kid who had walked right into Mother Stake's arms. Well, Mother needed something of that kind to keep her soul alive. . . . Of course, people would talk, but let them. They always did. . . . Cal seemed rather to like her. Of course, nothing serious. That would be nonsense. But Cal Beach was a chap a girl could be proud of, even if he was her father's hired man, and she might show some of them a thing or two at the summer picnics. She was glad she had worn her new skirt and her silk stockings out to the farm over Sunday. Let's see—how much had she coming from the law office? She fell asleep while making calculations of her assets, present and prospective, and a budget of expenditures, most of which had to do with the ladies' wear department of Sempter & Burton's general store.

In the morning the skies cleared and the rain stopped, and the seeding and plowing were resumed where they had been left off Saturday night. But as Cal followed his machine up and down the length of the oat field the vague schemes which had been pleasantly tormenting his mind began to take more definite form. Jackson Stake was an amiable and easy-going farmer, addicted, as Cal had learned, to only two vices—occasional overindulgence in "formalin" and a mania for attending auction sales and buying wholly unnecessary and usually obsolete equipment which he dragged home behind a wagon, or in it, in exchange for a lien note so drawn as to complicate his title to all things here and hereafter. It was Mrs. Stake who had told Cal about it.

"They've perhibited liquor," she said, "an' that's all right as far as it goes. Jackson don' get goin' as often as he use' to, though I mus' say when he does

start he goes further, an' now if they'd jus' perhibit auction sales p'rhaps we might get our feet under us. He fair loses his head at a auction sale. Go out to the boneyard some day; I call it the boneyard, jus' beyond the cow stables, an' see the old machinery he's got piled up there. Enough to mor'gage a township. An' me churnin' butter—"

That was the thought which came back to Cal. Jackson was amiable and well disposed, and here lay the opportunity to remodel the farm as it should be remodeled. Of what use was his higher education if it could not grapple with a situation of this kind; if he must leave this farm as crude and ugly as he had found it? Of course, he would have to meet the opposition of Grit and Gander. The two geegees, he called them, in revenge for the sobriquet of D. D. That opposition would take the form of ridicule, of ponderous mock-respect and weighty speculations which he would be permitted to overhear as though by accident. But what of that? Minnie would understand—

"Why Minnie?" he chided himself. "This is a social experiment, not a love affair."

He took the first opportunity to investigate the "boneyard." It lay, as Mrs. Stake had said, behind the cow stable. It consisted of a considerable area of land strewn with remnants of all kinds of farm machinery and overgrown with a rank crop of last year's weeds, still standing stiff and wooden after a winter's snow. Two self-binders, with reels in a state of partial collapse, and the hollow hull of an old grain separator, pirated by all the community in search of metal pulleys or fittings for more modern machines, first attracted his attention, and he gazed on them as one might gaze on the ribs of a wrecked ship protruding through the sand. As he strode about among the weeds he

became aware that he was walking on a veritable pavement of discarded machinery. With a stick he prodded up a set of mower knives, the rim of an old wheel, some fragments of hay rake. Then a thought struck him.

Grit had said something about running the cream separator with the old Ford. It had been said in jest, but he would turn it to account. Among all this mechanical flotsam he surely would find the means to carry out the idea. He went to Jackson Stake.

"If I can rig up a machine to run the separator by using some of that old machinery and the Ford, will it be all right?" he asked.

The farmer regarded him with some curiosity, dropping his lower jaw the better to promote contemplation.

"Now what in hay-time put that into your head?" he finally inquired.

"Well, you see, I found last Sunday that it takes a good bit of muscle to run that machine, and the old Ford might as well be earning its keep. If you'll let me have the use of the blacksmith shop and the run of the boneyard—"

"I think the wife's been talkin'. Did she put you up to this?"

"Not a word. But I'd like to try."

"Not enough to do in the fields? They'll be ready for barley seedin' in a day or two."

"Yes. But I could do this odd times; noon hours, and the like."

The farmer scuffled his thin hair. "You beat me," he admitted at length. "Suppose you tell me jus' what your game is?"

"There's no game, Mr. Stake." He saw that he had to go carefully. Jackson Stake, for all his amiability,

would be a hard man to move if he set himself in the way. He had little initiative and no aggressiveness, but, if provoked, he could develop an enormous inertia. He was one of those men whose will power is mostly won't power. What Jackson Stake mistook for determination in his own character was really stubbornness; the stubbornness which had grappled with this scrubland farm and converted it, little by little and year by year, into a valuable possession and a place of plenty; the stubbornness which had dared a pioneering life and bent environment to its will—that was the great strength of purpose, more negative perhaps than positive, which under a hearty exterior dominated Jackson Stake. He appeared genial and pliable, but when crossed he was hard as rock. He was a man to be handled with care.

Cal was now quick enough to perceive in his employer these qualities—qualities which until this moment had not come home to him. He mentally revised his line of attack.

"You've a great farm here, Mr. Stake," he began. "You've made the prairie blossom as the rose, as the poet says. Suppose you had had to cultivate all these fields with a spade?"

"It couldn't be done."

"Of course not. You do your farm work with power, not because it's easier, but because it's cheaper, and quicker, and it pays better. Now my idea is to carry that same principle into housework. I want to see this the most modern farm in Plainville district. I want the women to be talking after church, 'You should see the way Jackson Stake has fixed things up for his wife. Running the cream separator with power, if you please, and the washing machine, too.' And I'd like you to let me help you do that. That's all."

"Sounds the least bit like Minnie," said the farmer; "only you put it better. You don' threaten nothin', an' Minnie was strong on what she'd do an' what she wouldn't. Well, she left the farm over it, an' I ain't askin' her back. Not but what she's welcome, an' she comes out most ev'ry Sunday, an' she can have a home here when she wants it, but I ain't askin' her back. That's the kind of a badger I am." The farmer paused to let the weight of his pronouncement take effect. "Jus' the same, I ain't sayin' but there's somethin' in your idea, so go to it, only don' waste nothin', an' don' use up all my smithy coal."

With this authority Cal "went to it." He had a mechanical turn of mind, as well as a philosophic one, and his progress was easier than he expected. By milking time that evening he had the Ford backed up against the house, a tire off and the wheel blocked up, and a rope belt running from it through the window and on to a grooved pulley bolted to the separator. He found he would have to run the car in low gear to get the speed slow enough, and he had arranged a block of wood to hold the foot pedal in place. He was so enthused he hardly could wait until Jackson Stake and his wife brought up the cans of frothy milk from the cow stable. When all was ready he started the engine, and, watch in hand, set the throttle for the correct number of revolutions per minute. The separator set up its shrill whine as an accompaniment to the rattle of the old motor, and there was a moment of tense excitement, but the belt ran true on the pulleys, the skimmed milk and the cream began trickling out of their respective tubes, and the success of his machine was established. It was great business.

Gander and Grit, strolling up from the horse stable, took in the situation with amused interest. The ellip-

tic wrinkles in Grit's face lengthened until they effected almost a complete circle, save for the interruption of his nose, and Gander's Adam's apple was spasmodically gulping his emotion.

"I often heard it said that some day they'd breed a Ford that 'ud give milk," said Grit, "but I never reckoned I'd live to see it."

Gander weighed his response. "Wonderful what you can do, with a Ford an' an eddication. If I was a D. D. I bet I could make the Dodge give cream cheese."

"Or lay an egg," Grit suggested.

"A fried egg!" Gander exclaimed, but this flight of imagination proved too much for the two cronies. They caught arms, clinched, and in a moment were swaying and straining in a catch-as-catch-can wrestling bout. After a minute or two of Herculean combat their emotion had found relief, and, panting and grunting, they resumed consideration of the possibilities arising out of a Ford and an education.

"He'll be hemstitchin' the hangkerchiefs with it next," Gander predicted.

"Or feedin' the canary," Grit added, disregarding the slight objection that there was no canary.

Having so spoken, the two worthies, their bodies judiciously poised on well-spread legs and their thumbs tucked in their trouser bands, observed the processes with an exaggerated gravity, not unmixed with a secret hope that the pulley would drop off, or the belt break, or disaster in some form overtake the contrivance. But Cal had made sure of his job, and the separator ran on smoothly and regularly—more smoothly and regularly than if it had been turned by hand. As the motor warmed up it increased its speed and he had to readjust the throttle, but aside from that the operations were

quite automatic. Mrs. Stake looked on incredulously, as though unable to accept the testimony of her eyes, and a little doubtful about the morality of skimming milk by such a method. But her husband was openly enthusiastic. His big red face was contorted with approval.

"That was a hum-dingin' good idee of ours, Cal," he said. "No use breakin' your back if Henry 'll do it for you."

"Ain't the first back he's broke," Gander put in irrelevantly, but the farmer ignored the interruption. Plainly this was the moment to propose further innovations, and Cal struck at once. "Of course," he suggested, aligning himself with Jackson Stake's intimation of partnership in the good work, "what we really need is a small gasoline engine. It would run the washing machine, too—"

"What did I tell you?" said Grit. "And feed the canary—"

But the old farmer's imagination had been ignited. For a moment he glimpsed a world beyond the bear-tracks and the family post.

"I must watch out for one at an auction sale," he said, now bulging with constructive generosity. "Wish I'd bought an engine instead o' that manure spreader—"

"You had a good manure spreader already," Mrs. Stake reminded him, "but, of course, if it was somethin' o' use you wouldn' buy it, not for the soul or sake o' you. You'd trek home that ol' manure spreader, an' you with more lien notes than 'll be paid this fall or next, but if it was somethin' useful—"

Her voice trailed off plaintively, but it occurred to Cal that the moment was a singularly inopportune one for nagging. Now was the time to get Jackson Stake committed to a program of local uplift. He wheedled

the farmer to one side, and before the bowl of the separator stopped growling he had been constituted a committee of one with *carte blanche* to carry out improvements—provided they didn't cost anything.

He began with an effort to revise the farmyard on some sort of geometrical basis. With the help of Big Jim and his associates he straightened the granaries about and lined them up, and hauled the frame blacksmith shop, which had been occupying a position twenty-seven point five degrees from north of the horse stable, into alignment with the granaries. The three frame buildings, now in a straight row with the house, presented quite an avenue. "Beach Boulevard," Gander christened it, and "reckoned" there should be a policeman on traffic duty at the corner, as he had seen upon his only visit to Winnipeg. But Cal smiled and went on. Wait until Minnie came out from town Saturday night! See what Minnie would have to say about his —his social experiments. She was a bright girl, Minnie, and she would understand.

Cal blocked up the sagging corner of the water trough, so that it would not run over there before the other end was half full, and assuaged the mud hole around the well with several wagon loads of gravel. He dismantled the wooden pig pen in the centre of the grounds and hauled it log by log beyond the boneyard, where he reassembled it, to the eminent satisfaction of the occupants, who showed their approval of green grass and fresh earth to root in with bassoonic grunts of happiness. He loaded the great "basket" racks, discarded until haying time, on to wagons and moved them out beyond the stables. He straightened up the log pile, and now set to work to carry the sawed wood from what should have been the lawn in front of the house around to the north

end, where it could not be seen from "Beach Boulevard."

All these operations Gander and Grit observed with amused contempt. If Cal were fool enough to fill in his slack time with unnecessary work, let him. He would be wiser by fall. But Hamilton lent a hand with the piling of the wood, and sometimes came and sat on Cal's cushion in front of the granary after supper, and asked shy little questions about the outside world, and what it was like to be in a university.

It was on Friday that the happiness of the great week dropped into a gulf, as one walking with his head in the clouds may step over a precipice. Cal was working about the yard when Reed returned from school, swinging his lunch bag at the end of a strap. The boy was tanned and brown and happy; as Cal looked fondly down at him he seemed to have grown years since their camp at the head of the lake, less than two weeks ago. And to-day his face was more radiant than ever, for his was the joy of the child who has great news to tell.

"Oh, Daddy X, do you know? There's a boy in school and he's a bad boy, and his mother's bad, too!"

"Why, Reed! That is a very serious thing to say. You mustn't say such things about boys, and especially about their mothers."

"But it's true, Daddy X! All the boys say so, and his mother's bad, too, and worse than he is."

"Reed, you mustn't! But why do they say it?"

"Well, he's got no father, and that's why, although I don't just see— At any rate, it's very bad, and to-day we chased him nearly all the way home, and some of the boys called him a bad name, at least I thought it was bad, but they say it's not bad when it's true, and he fought with one of them and got knocked down

and it made his nose bleed and served him right, didn't it? And then he ran off home crying. You bet he was scared."

"And you took part in that?" It was the sternness of Cal's voice, rather than his words, that brought Reed up with a start. The child's face whitened a little; it was not often that Daddy X spoke to him like that.

"Yes—why?" he faltered.

"Because, in the first place, it's cowardly. A bunch of children can be as cruel as a pack of wolves. Young savages, every one of them! And you were cruel as well as cowardly."

"But, Daddy X"—the boy's lip was trembling—"it was true; they all said it was true; he's a bad boy, and his mother is bad, and he has no father. It *is* bad to have no father, isn't it, Daddy X?"

Cal discovered that his sympathies were in sharp collision with the moral law, but he took firm ground. "No, Reed, it is not bad, at least so far as the boy is concerned. The boy is as good—as good as you are. And perhaps his mother, too, is good—as good as your mother was."

It was their custom, when they talked of Reed's mother, always to speak with subdued voices and exalted mind, as of something hallowed and holy. Reed's voice and mind now instantly adapted themselves to their custom; the tremble died out of his lips, and in his eyes came a seraphic light which set Cal's heart thumping down the dark avenues of the past, down to the tragedy of Celesta Beach, and the night on which she had laid her soul bare before him.

"But *my* mother is with the angels, Daddy X," the child reminded him. "The angels came for her, and

she said that verse of mine—where you got my name—and went home with them."

Suddenly Cal knew himself to be of a lower order than the child, and he could only nod in silent assent. That which to him remained a flicker of hope, not quite extinguished by the gusts of his practical learning, was to Reed a beacon of light, undimmed and unbounded.

There was a minute of close heart-concord between them. Then—

"Daddy X, who *was* my father? You often tell me about my mother, but you never tell me about my father. Was he good, like my mother? Of course, I know you're my Daddy X, but you're not really my father, are you? Just my Daddy X?"

So it had come to this, and so soon. The pledge that he had given, that Reed should never know—how could he carry it, concealed, unguessed, through all his life? This at eight; Reed was only eight, and already he was ferreting into his heart with this bitterest of all questions. Reed might now accept any answer in faith, but grown-ups could not be deceived. Perhaps it had already been discussed at school; he recalled how Annie Frawdic had checked up on the name. What were Gander and Grit conjecturing behind his back? How had the community—which took so minute and curious an interest in the affairs of every member of it—accounted for this boy? What conclusions had it drawn, and at whose expense? What old women's whisperings were going on about the queer people at Jackson Stake's? How long until Reed would be hunted home from school, bleeding and crying and pursued by rampant Virtue, as had been this other boy to-day?

At all costs he must save the child. He must find an explanation that would not outrage the righteous-

ness of Plainville; if it reflected glory or sympathy upon Reed so much the better. He had it:

"You had a father, all right," he said. "He went to the war—and he did not come back. It is very sad, and that is why I have not liked to talk to you about it." Lying did not come easily to Cal Beach. The words seemed to lacerate his throat and he pressed his fingers about his neck. "He was a good man," he added; "you must always be proud of him."

The child received this intelligence with a gravity beyond his years. "I *am* proud of him," he said. "But"—and again there was the leap of light in his eyes—"you don't *know* that he has been killed? Some day he may come back—then he will find me, though he has to search all the world over for me, like the good knights searching for the Holy Grail! Oh, Daddy X!"

For a moment the boy pondered great possibilities; then, satisfied, he ran off for his after-school sandwich of bread and jam, and Cal was left dazed, humiliated, caught in a hatred that swept down upon him, engulfing him. He had thought it would die out in time; he had hoped that that wound had healed forever, but now it was torn open afresh. Hatred seized him like an evil spirit; he was again the wild beast in the jungle.

"And on top of everything else," he muttered, as though confronting Celesta's betrayer face to face, "I've made of myself a liar—for you. I've called you a good man; I've told that innocent child to be proud of you; I've paid you the honor of a hero! God forgive me! If ever I lay hands on you I'll tear you limb from limb!"

The incident filled him with an overwhelming unhappiness, and he was silent and morose at the supper table. But later in the evening he heard the unwonted sound of singing coming from the house. Before the

open window he stopped, held by the picture which it disclosed. Mrs. Stake was sitting in the "room," the sacred precinct with the ancestral crayon enlargements, into which Cal had not yet been admitted; her old form settled into a low rocker, her head back, her glasses thrust up on her brow, her thinning gray hair drawn sharply into a dwindling knob that once had been her glory. And on her lap was the boy Reed, his legs dangling over the sharp ridge of her own; his body snuggled against hers, his right arm thrown upward and about her neck. But it was her eyes that held his attention; there was in them something of that same light that filled Reed's when they spoke of his mother. And as she rocked and held the boy she sang,

> "Twilight is stealing over the sea,
> Shadows are falling dark on the lea,
> Borne on the night wind voices of yore
> Come from that far-off shore."

As Cal watched the singer and listened to her song he was held by a wonder of what voices from memory's far-off shores had touched again to love and romance the stern old heart of Mrs. Stake. He watched as her lean hands caressed the boy's legs; as they closed about his little body. He was stirred by this revelation, but stirred more poignantly still by something that defied analysis, that groped down into his being and held him with the clutch of a primal passion. For all his fine love for Reed his essential parental instinct had not yet been kindled, and it was that which now caught him, groping, smothering, somewhere in the uncharted mystery of existence. He drew quietly away as one who has chanced unwittingly upon a sacred privacy, but once more his heart was swept clean of the gust of hatred that had seized upon it.

A little later Reed joined him at their granary and they went to bed together, the boy saying his simple verse and then rolling his little frame into his protector's arms, for a chill night wind was creeping over the plains. But before he fell asleep he had a matter to settle.

"Mrs. Stake sang to me to-night, Daddy X," he said, "and she talked to me about her boy that is gone; her little Jackson, she called him. She says I make her think of him. Why should I make her think of him, Daddy X?"

"I don't know, Reed; I didn't even know she had lost a little boy."

"I didn't, either," reverently. "And she asked me if I would call her Grandma. May I, Daddy X?"

"If it pleases her, and you, you may."

And, this weighty matter settled, they fell asleep.

CHAPTER NINE

SHORTLY after noon next day the Jackson Stake homestead was honored by a visit from the two hired men on Ernton's farm—where Annie Frawdic boarded—a couple of miles to the south-east, and not far from the school. Disregarding roads and fences the visitors came straight across the oat field, and even at a distance the contrast presented by their figures stirred Cal to whimsical amusement. One was very tall, and very broad, and very thick; the other very short, and very narrow, and very thin; and as they walked the greater would, from time to time, entirely eclipse the lesser, so that at one moment two persons were to be seen approaching, and at another, only one.

"We call them Pounds and Ounces," said Gander, who, for all his contempt of Cal's inventions, never ceased to be cordial. "They look it."

When Pounds and Ounces came up it was apparent that great business had prompted their expedition. They had matters of moment with Gander, but they regarded Cal shyly and without comment further than unanimity as to its being a fine day.

"This is Cal Beach," Gander introduced him. "Not a bad fellow, but a D.D., but I bet you don' neither of you know what D.D. stands for."

"Dead dog," said Ounces, immediately accepting the challenge.

"Dippy Dickie," said Pounds, who read the comic papers.

Gander made a gesture of disgust. "Such ignorance!

An' before the professor! I'm ashamed o' you. Well, what's the big news?"

The big news proved to be that P. & O.—as they were called for short—had discovered the lair of a mother coyote. There was no doubt about the mother beast, and it was likely she had six or seven whelps. Now, unfortunately, the benighted municipality in which they lived offered no bonus for coyotes, but in the municipality to the eastward a bonus of two dollars a head was paid, whelps counting the same as adults. The only difficulty was that the claimant had to make a declaration that he had killed them in that municipality.

"So we thought if you'd come and bring your car we could dig the pups out and put 'em in a sack and take 'em over the line before we killed 'em," Ounces naively explained. "It's twelve beans easy pickin' and we might 's well have it."

Gander concurred. "Sure thing," he said. "Be with you in a minute."

He ran to the house for a rifle, to the blacksmith shop for a shovel, to the oat bin for an empty sack. "Before the professor started this here garden city we could pick up a shovel an' a sack mos' anywhere," he complained. "Now we have to look 'em all up in the direct'ry."

He brought the car out of the garage with a flourish, piled P. & O. into it, and was off down the trail that skirted the oat field. Cal waved a hand after them genially, treating it all as an incident in the day's work, and marvelling somewhat upon a code of morals which would not make a false declaration but had no scruples about attaining the same end by moving the young coyotes into the next township. Nothing in the mild incident, the glaring sky, or the whirling dust-

cones in the distance gave him any hint that Gander's absence that afternoon was to turn into new and swifter channels the placid currents of his life.

About four o'clock Jackson Stake found his hired man busy repairing the fence that, in its better days, had enclosed the family garden. He looked on while Cal drove a staple, and shook the top of the post with his big fist, reassuringly.

"Gander's off bummin' with the car, ain't he?" he asked presently. "Got any idee where he went?"

Cal exposed as much as seemed necessary of the coyote conspiracy.

"So that's how he's burnin' up my tires an' gasoline!" the farmer exploded. "If some day the Council offers a bounty for damfools I sure know where I can make two dollars."

Cal went on driving a staple while the barbed wire sang pleasantly to the pounding of his hammer. A little ripple of tune ran down its twisted strands from post to post, crescendoing as, by means of the stretcher in his left hand, Cal steadily tightened the wire.

"No sayin' when he'll be back," the farmer continued. "If they *do* get the beasts, which ain't likely —like enough they'll find it's foxes when they dig 'em out, but then ol' Skeezicks that's Clerk o' the Council don' know a fox's ear from a fish's tail so that don' make no difference—they'll kill 'em an drive right on in an' get the money an' fill up with formalin an' like enough bust an axle in a badger hole whoopin' home after dark." Jackson Stake was in a mood to be prepared for the worst. "'Sides, somun's got to go to Plainville for Minnie. The missus 's 'phoned for some things she's to bring out for to-morrow. Dang it all, since we got a 'phone in the house we've got nothin' else. Allus out o' somethin'. I mind when we use n't

to be in Plainville once a month and allus had lots; now it's a dull day we don' run out o' somethin'. That's labor-savin' inventions for you. Another invention or two an' we won't get nothin' done but windin' up inventions. Well, somun's got to go. Didn't useta mind drivin' it with a team; drove it many a time, winter an' summer, when there wasn't settlement nor telephones, an' thought nothin' of it, but it's different now. After you sleep for awhile on feathers you don' take to the feel of straw like you useta. That's what I say to these politician fellows that's always goin' to stop the trek from country to city by makin' the country more like a city. 'City conveniences, good roads, telephones, mail delivery,' they says; 'that's the things 'll keep the young folks on the farm.' An' the more they give us o' those things the more the kids beat it for town. You can't make a calf into a kitten an' you can't make the country into a city, an' the more you try the sorer everybody gets. When I useta drive that road with ol' Bill an' Nigger; I mind there was only one house between here an' Plainville, an' ten miles on a winter's night—— Say, wha's to prevent you goin' for Minnie with that ol' skim-milker o' yours?"

Cal's heart gave a most unscientific bump. What, indeed!

"Nothing that I know of," he said, as casually as he could. "That is, if you let me draw on your gasoline barrel. And you'll have to crank the separator to-night by hand."

"Strike me! When I take holt o' that ol' sep'rator I jus' naturally *scare* the cream out o' it. But I ain't the twister I useta be. The old days—when Mother useta set the milk in the milkhouse an' skim it with her front finger—those were the days! But once you get a new idee—— It's like losin' the hankerin' for

straw after you've slep' a spell on feathers. I reckon that's one o' the things wrong with the world these days; two many new idees—— Well, someun's got to go for Minnie, an' it looks like you. Shouldn't wonder but you're a bit lonesome for the white lights, yourself, an' Plainville 'll do you good." He spoke with friendly sarcasm of his country town. "Don' spend all your money on the op'ra. By the way, how're you fixed?"

Cal took this to be an inquiry into his financial standing. Investigation revealed a capital of forty cents.

"Well, that's about the price of a big time in Plainville," Jackson Stake commented, meanwhile digging in his trouser pocket. He presently produced a crumpled and twisted bill, out of the creases of which dropped fragments of smoking tobacco, a couple of matches, a screw nail and an American nickel. When it was smoothed out it disclosed a denomination of two dollars.

"Take that on account," he said, "an' don' spend it all in one place. You can go as soon as you're ready."

It was an hour, at his best pace, before Cal could be ready. Not only must he shave and change, but he must oil and grease Antelope, replace the tire which had been taken off for the cream separator operations, and generally tighten up the clattering joints. So intent was he upon these matters that not until the last moment did he think of Reed. But Reed had gone gopher hunting with Trixie early in the afternoon and was probably miles away over the prairie.

It was plain the boy could not go, and in spite of his loyalty Cal felt his heart thump again. Not quite so tremendously, but still it certainly did thump. At any rate, he reasoned to himself, they might be late getting home; Minnie had some purchases to make,

had she not?—and Reed would be better in bed. And again there came a little bump-bump.

Cal set off joyously, out through the poplar groves; down the main road by the school; glancing up half expecting to see Annie Frawdic, until he recalled that it was Saturday; then, still following the principal road, across country in a south-westerly direction to Plainville. By this time he was out of the scrubland and into open prairie; gently rolling fields of black earth, now tinted with green as the new crop thrust its tender shoots toward the light; now skirting a sleugh where Mr. and Mrs. Wild Duck (who are about to take up housekeeping in a fine thick clump of grass which Mrs. W. D. had selected for the purpose), observed him with the indifference born of honeymoon affection and well-enforced game laws; now over a long ridge that disclosed the cupolas of the grain elevators in Plainville. The little car ate up the distance greedily and in less than half an hour Cal was dusting down the main thoroughfare of the town. Two rows of automobiles, representing all grades of value and condition, were lined against the cement curbs. Cal found an opening among them and brought his dog-eared Ford boldly along side of the pretentious car of some wealthy farmer.

"'Big car, big mortgage,'" Cal quoted from the philosophy of Jackson Stake, as his eye took in the beautiful lines of Antelope's neighbor. "No flirtations, now, Ante, with that polished dandy! Remember, virtue becomes the poor."

He paused with one foot on the running-board and patted her tattered upholstery sentimentally, encouraging high resolves with a quotation,

"Know then this truth (enough for man to know),
'Virtue alone is happiness below.'"

Groping in his pocket he found a key, and whimsically turned it in the lock with which a previous owner had equipped the Ford. "Not as a precaution against theft, but as a compliment to the car," he explained.

He had intended going straight to Mrs. Goode's boarding house, but a glance at his watch showed six o'clock. Minnie would be at supper; she would insist that he join her, and that would be leaving the check at the wrong place. He decided to look over the town and find a place where he could buy a meal.

The main thoroughfare of Plainville was wider than the principal street of many a metropolis; it was a broad, unpaved traffic canal shored by banks of cement sidewalk. He regarded it with interest. This was, no doubt, the "Main Street" he had read about, that mercenary and visionless monster, conceived of social inertia, born of an existence drab, ignorant, commonplace. But to Cal, Main Street seemed broad, cheerful, innocuous. To be sure, the business blocks were not those of Broadway or Yonge Street, but they probably housed quite as reputable a class of occupants. From the little incident which Reed had reported from school Cal was beginning to understand that in the country places one has to be reputable—at all costs. The social life of a small community is too thin to afford safe cover for indiscretions. . . . The buildings were fronted on the street level with windows of plate glass enclosed in cracking wooden frames that had once been painted, and walled between with columns of brick or artificial stone. Gaps in the irregular profile which lined the street indicated vacant lots littered with packing boxes and empty tin cans, or utilized as open-air warehouses for farm machinery. The ground floors were devoted to trade; the upper stories, in most cases,

to living rooms or offices. Many of the buildings attained to only one story, and their diminutive size contrasted with the broad street emphasized their squatty appearance. Only one—the Palace Hotel—made a profession of three stories, and even the rear part of it, tapering off to two, rather belied its bold pretensions.

A bench in front of the hotel was congenially occupied with Saturday evening loungers, who regarded Cal silently but with mild interest. Strangers came and went in Plainville, but not so numerously as to escape attention. A dingy waiting room, papered with announcements of Plainville's "Big Day" on the twenty-fourth, and of the seed grain fair which had occurred the previous March, opened off the main entrance. It was deserted except for a man in shirt sleeves behind the counter which barricaded one corner, displaying an assortment of chewing gum and cheap cigars. He was engaged in performing an autopsy upon a speedometer with a screw driver, and showed no sign of being diverted from his purpose.

"Can I get a meal here?" Cal asked at length.

"Nope," said the proprietor of the Palace Hotel, without looking up. "Don' serve meals since pro'bition." With the screw driver he pursued something in the vitals of the mechanical corpse before him.

"Yet I suppose people continue to eat?" Cal ventured to suggest.

No answer, but hot pursuit of the elusive something.

Suddenly a screw flew out and across the counter. Both men grabbed for it, but Cal got it first, and with great deliberation tucked it into his waistcoat pocket.

For the first time the hotel keeper raised his eyes, exposing a broad, bovine face. "Well, what the hell?" he inquired.

"Now, old Oxo, just pay attention to me for a minute. Where do I eat?"

A latent sense of humor, not less than a quick appraisal of Cal's biceps, came to the support of the boniface in a situation charged with possibilities.

"Try the Chink at the end o' the block," he grinned. Cal surrendered the screw and they parted friends.

Cal found the Chinese restaurant occupying a building of plain, unpainted boards. For a moment he studied in amusement the sign which proclaimed "No Sing—Wun Lung." Evidently it had been perpetrated by a painter with a zest for a practical joke, but the subtle humor was lost on the proprietor, whose adventures in English rarely escaped the borders of his bill of fare. Through the uncurtained windows Cal could see a dozen men eating at plain wooden tables, after the manner of the farm staff at Jackson Stake's. He turned in and joined them. His check was forty cents.

After supper he strolled about the little town, making a mental inventory of it. The business section crowded about a single street; back of that were churches, a number of modest residences, with two or three making some claim to pretension; a couple of lumber yards; a large, oval roofed skating and curling rink, now deserted and dank with its lingering ice, and a big red brick schoolhouse standing in spacious grounds surrounded by a double row of Manitoba maples, many of them obviously dead. With the exception of the two or three houses referred to there was no pretense at orderliness; the vanities of Plainville people ran to automobiles and gramophones, but not to lawns or neat back yards. The whole effect was strangely reminiscent of that produced by the cluster of buildings on Jackson Stake's homestead. Plainville, with the exception of its business street, its schoolhouse and churches,

and its two or three homes of some pretension, was a farmyard overgrown.

A boy driving a cow by dint of much loud argument paused long enough to direct Cal to Mrs. Goode's boarding house, and he followed the narrow plank sidewalk that led to its door. Cement sidewalks, it seemed, were reserved for the business street; suburbanites must be content to walk on planks, laid lengthwise, and indulging an annoying habit of up-tilting their loose and rotten ends to the discomfiture of the pedestrian. A practice even more annoying to couples married in the not too remote past was that of engulfing the wheels of baby carriages in their broad cracks, which always seemed broad enough to let the wheel down, but never broad enough to let it up again. Cal was able to rescue a young matron and her offspring from such a predicament, and to agree with her that "if Councillor Clarke lived on First Street, instead of Third, we wouldn't have these rotten planks for a sidewalk." Plainville was up-to-date in its imputations upon its governing officials.

At Mrs. Goode's gate he met Minnie coming down the short walk that led to the boarding house door. She had been watching for him from the screened veranda and had timed her progress to a nicety. She wore a smart dress of some navy blue stuff, relieved with a dash of red about the neck and cuffs, and around that V-shaped aperture, not too modest and not too daring, through which she conceded a glimpse of a white and well-formed throat and bosom. Her hat was of blue, in keeping with her dress, and carried only a perky red feather to hint that its sombreness by no means suggested the mood of the active little head it covered.

"I was afraid you had had trouble," she remarked,

as though they had parted an hour before; "I turned down a chair beside me at supper, expecting to have the honor—"

"That was good of you. The honor was shared by two other farm hands—unappreciative, I am afraid—at the table of our celestial friend, No Sing. The cause of his musical limitations is indicated, with refreshing frankness, on his sign—"

"You mean you went to the Chink's for supper," the practical Minnie interrupted him, short-cutting through his verbiage. "And I with a chair turned down, in defiance of the glances and quips of the other boarders! Well—"

She shot at him a look, half of protest and half of raillery. Her skin was pink and clear, and her eyes had a dance in them like sunlight on a ripply stream.

"I'm sorry," he pleaded, dropping his voice. "How could I know?"

"You might have known. *I* would have known. . . . Well, I have some shopping to do. Will you come?"

He saw that the red effect around her throat was obtained by lacing a ribbon through eyelets in her waist; all her dress suggested simplicity with dignity, and he contrasted her with one or two frippishly clad young women he had seen on Main Street. Minnie had learned the first principle of art.

Their shopping led them from store to store, and, as the farmers were now crowding in for their Saturday evening combination of business and gossip, their progress was slow. When at last they had finished and Cal had piled all the parcels in the back seat of the long-suffering Antelope, two double rows of cars lined Main Street, and it was with difficulty he could thread his

way through the groups of holidaying farmers that blocked the sidewalk.

"Well, that's that," said Minnie. "Are we ready?"

But Cal was not ready—quite. He was in a dilemma. With other girls he might have been embarrassed, but Minnie's presence exuded frankness as a rose exudes perfume. He asked her:

"What does a young man do in Plainville when he wishes to entertain a lady friend?"

"There are two possibilities," she told him. "He may take her to the Electric Theatre, where they hold hands under her hat, or to the Roseland Emporium, where they eat an ice cream sundae."

"And your preference?"

She hesitated, as though weighing a matter of some nicety. He had a feeling that it was a contest of ice cream against the friendly shelter of a hat. Ice cream won.

"The theatre would keep us pretty late," she said, as she led him to the Roseland Emporium, a sort of cheap bazaar festooned with faded paper roses, and furnished at the rear with tables where ice cream and soft drinks were served. They ate a David Harum to the accompaniment of an overworked and complaining gramophone which had the single merit of partially submerging the boisterous wit of the other patrons. The entertainment cost Cal forty cents.

It was not until they were out of town in the rickety Ford that Cal began to feel reasonably at home. In the town he had trotted about after Minnie with a vague sense of being a sort of faithful collie, but now, with the wheel in his hands and the grey belt of road winding up beneath them, he was again master of his destinies. The sun had just set, and the western sky was a sea of gold; overhead, tattered shreds of cloud

caught the evening color and glowed gently in mauve and purple. There was no wind; the croaking of frogs came up on the gentle air above the rumble of the Ford; the fields were very pastoral and still. Sharply marked currents of warm air—strange atmospheric Gulf streams, as they seemed—swept Cal's face as he crested the knolls and ridges, but a chill tang was abroad on the levels, and the presence of Minnie, close beside him on the front seat, was peculiarly grateful. He had long ago learned to drive his car proficiently with one hand, and it happened that the other one dropped from the wheel. . . .

He talked of the plans he had for remodeling the farm; of what had been done already; of the enthusiasm of her father, which he hoped would presently express itself in the form of paint for the granaries and the house. Then there was the great project which as yet was only taking form in his mind; the new building, a sort of annex to the house, to be equipped with gasoline power arranged to drive the cream separator and the washing machine; to pump water; eventually, perhaps, to supply electric light.

"And you should see the yard," he told her. " 'Beach Boulevard,' Gander has named it, more, I think, in sorrow than in anger, because I've hauled the buildings into line, and dragged the pig pen into the fields, and propped up the water trough so it doesn't leak over the corner. You won't know it."

He awaited her enthusiasm, but for a minute she did not answer him at all. When she did,

"You might as well save yourself the trouble," she told him. "It's no use. I've been through it all, and I know. Not that I ever moved the pig pen, or the granaries; not that. But I've been through the same fight. They beat me, and they'll beat you."

"But you should see your father. He's all set up—"

"It's a bubble, and one of these minutes it's going to burst. Gander and Grit laugh, but they're wiser than you. They know."

Her mood of finality nettled him. "Know—what do they know?" he demanded. "They haven't a glimpse of what it should be—of what it could be made—"

"That's just it," she interrupted. "They haven't a glimpse, and so they're content. I had a glimpse, and it drove me from the farm. You have a glimpse, and it's making you do wonderful things—wonderful things, if only they'd last!"

Her note was one of protesting resignation, of unwilling but complete acceptance of the inevitable.

He was subdued. "Why will they not last?" he asked.

"I don't know. I think it is because everyone on the farm has too much to do. Always tired, or just getting over being tired, or just going to do something that'll make 'em tired. It becomes chronic. When you're like that you let everything slide that will slide. You fall into the way of it. You leave the granary where it is; you leave the pig pen where it is; you let the water trough spill over if it likes. You don't care. You get that way, because you're always tired, or have just been tired, or are just going to be tired. You do what must be done; you let everything else slide."

"But I don't find that to be so," he protested. "I'm not always tired. Of course, I had some stiff muscles at first, but the work is really rather easy; much easier than plugging for a university 'exam,' for example."

She was thoughtful over his argument. "Maybe," she commented, at length. "I've been through something like that. It's not really the work, perhaps; perhaps it is the monotony, the changelessness of the

environment. Always the same people, the same fields, the same horses, the same cows. Particularly the cows. . . . At any rate I was tired, and I let 'er slide."

"But you didn't," he corrected. "You couldn't. You couldn't 'let everything slide'—"

"That's right. There was something in me that wouldn't stand it, and I left. They don't understand me, either, any more than they do you. I'm afraid we're regarded as a couple of freaks."

Cal warmed to the idea of being considered a freak if it classified him with Minnie Stake. They were silent again as the car rumbled on into the gathering darkness.

"Well, it's an experiment, anyway," he said, at length, "and I'm going through with it. We'll see."

She laughed gently, inducingly. "I think we're all experiments," she said. "I guess life is pretty much an experiment, don't you think? An experiment, and an adventure. At any rate that's what it is for me, and I ramble in joyously where angels fear to tread, or something to that effect. I got fed up on the farm, so I quit it. If I get fed up on the office I'll quit that, too."

"And go back to the farm?"

"No. Anything but that."

After a while she took up the thread again at that point. "I know it's rather rough on Mother and Dad —I know it is," she admitted. "We've never had any quarrel or anything of that kind, you know, but just —our paths seemed to separate. I guess there's a good deal of that in life, and it's hard on the old folks. But one has to live his life, doesn't he? I suppose Mother wouldn't have taken it so much to heart if I'd been the first, but, you see, Jackson did the same thing, and it makes it hard on her."

"Jackson? Your father?"

"No—my oldest brother. Perhaps you haven't heard of him. We don't shout his name from the housetops, for a fact, but as you're sure to hear it sooner or later you might as well have it straight. It's a wonder Annie Frolic hasn't found a way to let you know before this. You *must* have been sticking close to your job."

Cal was aware of her eyes, half frank, half bantering, upon him, but he did not answer. Evidently she was interested in his acquaintance with Annie Frawdic, and he had no objection to that interest. It was important for what it indicated.

"We don't say much about him," she repeated. "Partly because we don't know. He was quite a bit older than the rest of us; he'll be—let me see—about thirty now, if he's living. And he was a bit harum-scarum—always was—but a fellow a girl could like for all that. I don't know that that makes much difference, when it comes to liking, do you think? Well, he got up and left. That was about ten years ago. Worked in Winnipeg for a while; then at Fort William; then on the lake boats; then on the lower lakes. Used to write once in a while, just a line or two, but you should have seen Mother when a letter would come! She never lost faith. You know, Ham and I are Stakes, after our father, but Jackson and Gander took after Mother. In appearances, I mean. Dark, you know— Well, his last letter was from Kingston. After that we lost track of him altogether. Mother has persuaded herself he went to the war, but I dunno." She had fallen into the vernacular. "It wouldn't be so bad if one could believe that. It would mean that his life had counted for something, anyway, don't you think?"

She had a friendly way of appealing to him with

that intimate little "Don't you think?" that pleased him very much.

"Yes, I think so," he said, simply. "If it hadn't been for Reed I'd have been there, too."

"Bless the boy! He's a wonder, don't you think? But, of course, Mother has never given up. She insists that Jackie—that was his pet name—will come home some day, but I dunno— Why, here we are! It isn't far, is it?"

"Not half far enough," he said, as he gave her some unnecessary assistance out of the car, which she accepted with unnecessary dependence.

It was still the twilight of a prairie evening, but the farmyard was asleep, with no sound save the contented blowing of cows drowsing in a heaven of smoke from the mosquito smudge. He helped her carry the parcels to the house, and after they had set them on the table they stood for a moment in the door.

"Well—good night," she said suddenly, and went in.

With a strange confusion of emotions he turned to the granary, and to the boy Reed.

CHAPTER TEN

THE twenty-fourth of May was famous for being a national holiday, observed in memory of the birthday of Queen Victoria; and for being, by established practice, the date of the first ball game of the season at Plainville. As the birthday of the Queen receded further and further into the past, and as the Plainville baseball team developed in prowess, the holiday became less and less a commemorative event and more and more a demonstrative one.

Cal had gleaned something of its importance from the columns of the Plainville *Progress* and from desultory remarks of Gander and Grit. It seemed to be an established thing that every one went to Plainville on "The Twenty-fourth," and it was Cal's purpose not to disregard so proper a custom. It was time Reed had a visit to the town; the boy was too isolated on the farm. Besides, a holiday, and a ball game, and Minnie Stake—

But Fate ruled otherwise. The barley field in which Cal was seeding would easily have been finished on the twenty-third had it not rained on the twenty-second. But it did, and this threw Cal just one day behind his schedule.

"I reckon you won't partic'lar mind workin' on the Twenty-fourth," Jackson Stake observed. " 'Tain't like as if you had friends in Plainville, or hereabout, that you could visit with, an' it's time that field was finished."

Cal swallowed his annoyance, remembering that

Jackson Stake was in most respects an ideal employer. "All right, I'll finish it," he said.

"Now you're shoutin'," said the former, approvingly. "She played us a dirty trick, rainin' yesterday, but you'll finish to-morrow, easy. If you're done early take a run down to the lake; it'll be good for you an' the boy, an' you may get some fishin'. There's a troll an' line somewhere in the kitchen. The wife 'll get it for you; she can't go, account o' the cows at night."

Cal recalled Minnie's reference to cows in her proposed scenario of "Why Girls Leave the Farm," and felt that he was beginning to understand. But he was thinking, too, of the farmer's reference to Reed; the boy had in some way got a grip on old Jackson Stake and his wife that was quite unexplainable.

On the Twenty-fourth Gander and Grit worked a short forenoon and stabled their horses early. Cal came in soon afterward. He was in time to witness their hasty shaving before the tin mirror at the corner of the house.

"Suppose Youth and Beauty will be out in force to-day," he remarked as genially as he could, as he observed Grit carefully excavating the elliptic wrinkles that furrowed his brown cheeks.

"Sure," said Grit. "Sorry you can't come. Guess Minnie 'll have to fall back on her bank clerk to-day."

There was nothing malicious in the thrust, but it struck home nevertheless. Cal pretended to laugh, and went in to dinner with a stone in his stomach.

In the afternoon, tramping up and down behind his four-horse team in the black field, still heavy and dank with the rain of two days before, Cal argued it out with himself. "Of course," he admitted, "it is perfectly natural that Minnie should have a friend in town—a bank clerk, or whoever he is. A girl of Minnie's quali-

ties. You have to expect that. Besides, my interest in her is purely experimental."

He did not like the word experimental, so he substituted scientific, but with no better results. "After all, it *is* experimental, and we'll let it go at that," he concluded, as he sent a warning shout to Big Jim, who had a genius for scenting his master's moods and imposing on them.

The trouble was it wouldn't "go at that." A dozen times between one end of the field and the other his mind would flit to Plainville. He saw Minnie and her bank clerk—a tall, thin fellow, as he pictured him, whom he could have knocked sprawling with one punch —he saw them going into the ball grounds, finding their seats in the grandstand, eating peanuts out of the same bag, applauding the Plainville team in its successes, commiserating together over its reverses, concurring with the grandstand crowd concerning the utter depravity of the umpire and the visiting players. Then there would be supper, somewhere—he had a vision of Wun Lung's—and after that, perhaps, the Electric Theatre, where hands may be held under a friendly hat. He would have liked to think of Minnie as unsophisticated, but he suspected the facts were against him.

Cal was on his last round when Reed, brown and busy from a day's gopher snaring on the prairie, came up with him. At the end of the field they unhitched, and Cal flung the boy on to the broad back of Big Jim, who had become accustomed to this familiarity, and who bore him homeward with mingled pride and condescension.

In the house they found Annie Frawdic. "Pleased to see you again, Mr. Beach," she said, extending her hand. "I thought you would have been in Plainville."

"Why—I thought the same of you," said Cal.

"No; at the last moment I decided not to go," she explained. "Thought I would rather slip over and have a quiet afternoon with Mrs. Stake. We old ladies don't often have a chance to visit, do we, Mrs. Stake?"

"Old ladies! Tosh! Don' be sayin' that before Cal. You're a young girl, Annie."

Annie Frawdic shook a lean finger in the face of the farmer's wife. "May the Lord forgive you for trifling with the truth," she threatened. . . . But what Annie did not say was that her decision to visit Mrs. Stake was made after she had seen Cal's team return to the field for the afternoon.

A thought came to Cal and he acted upon it.

"We're going down to the lake, Reed and I, for a little picnic and a word or two with Nature. Will you join us? You, too, Mrs. Stake? You can come, can't you?"

But Mrs. Stake protested. She simply couldn't. There were the cows, you know. "But you go, Annie; go along, that's the girl. I'll make you up a bite o' lunch."

Annie Frawdic argued that she had come to visit Mrs. Stake, not to go picnicking, but she was careful not to strain her invitation to the breaking point. Half an hour later Cal, Annie, and Reed were bumping in the old Ford along the little used road which led to a secluded beach on the lake—not the main road over which Cal and Reed had come three weeks before. This was an old timber trail, cut by the early settlers in pursuance of their business of filching logs and firewood from the Government lands adjoining the lake. In recent years it had been used only by an occasional picnicking or fishing party. Cal guided the car with subconscious skill among the overgrown stumps which

bordered the trail, and presently, from the brow of a hill, a vision of the lake burst upon them, framed in its broad valley like a picture worked in silver and amethyst.

They stopped for a moment to feast on the scene. "I always think nature is so wonderful," she said, bellowsing her thin chest like a motion-picture heroine.

"Yes—and so original," he agreed.

She seemed to suspect a smile behind his words, but his lips were straight and sober.

"Will you tell us a story about it to-night, Daddy X?" piped Reed from the back seat.

"About something, to be sure. Come, Antelope; slow and steady."

There was occasion for both injunctions, for the trail down the hillsides to the lake was tortuous and uncertain. Wagon wheels of bygone years had furrowed the virgin turf, and the rains of succeeding seasons has sluiced a once passable trail into a miniature gorge of crumbling yellow clay, dry except in spring or after heavy rain. Straddling this narrow canyon Antelope wormed her way like a pudgy caterpillar, slithering from side to side on the crumbling clay, while Annie Frawdic wrestled with a feminine impulse to avert disaster by seizing Cal's arm. She wrestled successfully, and at last the sandy beach was reached in safety.

"What a driver you are!" she bellowsed again. "I felt so safe—"

"Oh, it's easy enough coming down," he assured her. "The trick will be to go up. Antelope has an annoying habit of balking if you hold her head too high, and then we go sliding back to the bottom."

Reed supplied the technical information. "That's

because the gasoline won't run from the tank to the carburetor," he explained.

"Oh, I'm so relieved," said Annie. "I was afraid the engine might stop, or something."

The trail continued along the beach, but they found a pleasant sandy spot with tall trees nearby and drew the car to one side. Reed was out with a whoop and the next minute, bare-legged, was wading in the shallow water. His two elders looked on with diminishing reserve.

"Who wouldn't be a child?" she said.

"All right. Suppose we do?"

She colored a little, but her eyes met his. Then she seated herself on a stone at a modest distance, and presently she was tripping along gingerly in six inches of water. Cal brought out the troll and line, and, with trousers rolled to his knees, waded as far into the water as he could. Then he swung the hook about his head and threw it still farther in. It needed no small faith to suppose that any fish would respond to such obvious advances, but Cal's faith was functioning almost one hundred per cent. It occurred to him that some fish were only waiting for advances. . . .

And his faith was rewarded. Not immediately, but soon. Came a splash and a widening circle where a fish jumped for a fly, and a moment later Cal dexterously landed his hook at the same spot. He had only a second to wait; first a slight tug; then a jerk; then the line ran off in a huge elliptic. Cal's shout brought Annie and Reed as far into the water as prudence would permit, but when suddenly the fish changed his tactics and steamed full speed for shore, Annie made a wild dash for safety. A pike of three pounds.

"Just the measurements for supper," Cal said, when he had blustered Annie into hefting the lithe, cold,

slippery body in her two hands. "Now for a fire."

They gathered some bits of wood and built a little fire on the sand, and no one seemed to remember that they were still in their bare feet. The sand was warm and caressing, and who cared?

When supper was over Reed went wading again, but Annie and Cal sat by the fire and talked. The girl interested and amused him. She was a fruitful field for experiment. She was another exhibit for his collection to be gathered in the interests of Truth and Science. She had ideas, too, and their talk was not wholly banal. Yet she lacked something—something that was not lacking in Minnie Stake. Cal tried to analyze it, to define the deficiency, but could not. Only—she did not draw him; she did not appeal— As if appeal had anything to do with investigations in the interests of Truth and Science! He laughed a little at his own inconsistency, and Annie thought he was laughing at her wit, and was very happy.

The sun hung low at the end of a ruddy path along the water and the shadow of their seated figures fell like crumpled giants on the sand when suddenly they heard the sound of an approaching car. A moment later a new Ford came plunging along the overgrown trail and through the willows almost beside them. Embarrassed, they sprang to their feet, and Annie, slipping in the sand, clutched Cal's arm to save herself from falling.

The Ford had stopped, and Cal's first glance discovered Minnie Stake and a young man; not the thin, collapsible fellow he had pictured, but solid and square-shouldered and likely to carry a wallop in his biceps. For a moment the two couples faced each other; Cal actually could trace the line of Minnie's vision down to his bare feet, and Annie's, and he wished the sand

might swallow him, at least to the knees. So long they stood in silence, or it seemed so long, that he began to wonder if Minnie was not going to speak at all. But presently she spoke, quietly and with that quality of poise which he had found in her before, but which he had not analyzed, and which he now knew distinguished her from Annie Frawdie—

"Good evening, Annie. You know Mr. Hale? Cal, this is my friend, Mr. Hale—Mr. Beach."

They shook hands, and Cal asked if they would stay and share some fragments. "We have some crusts and the ribs of a fish," he said, "and, of course, I could catch another fish in a minute or two." What mattered it if he and Annie *were* in their bare feet? She should see the couples at any bathing beach! But that was different. No, it wasn't. Yes, it was—

Reed came up from the water, and Cal noticed that Minnie's eyes took in his presence with interest, and, he thought, with something of relief.

"Thanks. I'm afraid we can't stay," she said. "Mr. Hale is just trying out his new car. We came down by the east end of the lake, and are going home by the farm. We'll have supper there, on the way."

"How's the road up the hill?" Mr. Hale inquired.

"Not good, but you can make it."

Mr. Hale got out of the car, patted the radiator with boyish affection, removed the cap, and looked judiciously into the aperture. Then he retrieved a tomato can from under the back seat and went down to the lake for water. Cal noted that Annie, whose policy it was never to miss a chance, lent her services in dipping the can.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," said Minnie, in a low voice, when the others were out of earshot.

"Yes—for both of us," Cal agreed.

They left immediately, and Cal and Annie, without a word, put on their shoes. Then, as they sat by the fire, Reed swooped upon Cal with the demand that he make good his promise of a story. Cal made a couple of unsuccessful attempts, but could not bring his mind to romancing. He gave it up with, "Sorry, old man. I'm afraid I can't get my mind off that big fish. He was a dandy, wasn't he?"

"You bet!" said the boy.

"Well, take the line and try your luck," Cal told him, and sent him off delighted.

Annie Frawdic broke a silence that was becoming embarrassing. "I'm sorry, Cal, if I made you—if we, among us—spilled the beans," she said. In some ways Annie was no fool.

"Oh, it wasn't that," said Cal, and wondered why he should lie to Annie Frawdic. . . .

Early twilight was beginning to settle in the trees, and the sound of croaking frogs, loud against the evening silences, came from reedy inlets up the lake. "I guess we'd better be going," Cal suggested. "We need daylight for the hill."

He did not go back the way he had come, but by way of Ernton's, where he left Annie Frawdic at her gate. He tried to return the lingering pressure of her hand as she thanked him for the "just wonderful time" he had given her, but her fingers stirred no emotion within him. To his heart he confessed he was "fed up" on Annie Frawdic.

When he reached the Jackson Stake homestead the holiday makers had not yet returned from Plainville, and Minnie and Mr. Hale had gone. Deliberately he had taken Annie home first in order that he might not meet Minnie again that night, but now that she was gone the stone in his stomach doubled in weight.

They had just gone; they would not be in Plainville yet; they would be on the road, that same road where, just a few evenings ago, Minnie and he—

What was the use of lingering over it? Throw it out of your mind. Be done with it!

He arranged the cushions and the blankets for Reed, and the lad, tired with his great day of pleasure, lisped his verse and fell asleep. But Cal sat at the door, thinking. And when he had thought for an hour or more he had thought himself around to this:

There was only one person in the world for whom he really cared, and who really cared for him. That person was the boy Reed, his sister Celesta's son. In these days he had been tempted to forget that Reed was more to him than anybody else—than everybody else. Reed was his own flesh and blood. A great surging of the heart swept through him. All the others were experiments; exhibits in the one great experiment of life. Very well—

He went to bed and gathered the little, sleeping form in his arms. The warm heat of his young life—the warm blood of Celesta—thrilled through his limbs and into his body. . . . He was caught in the gust of a great loneliness, and before he slept his pillow was wet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MINNIE STAKE'S holiday with Archie Hale had not been one of undivided pleasure. For some days she had been looking forward to "The Twenty-fourth" with a degree of misgiving. She rather liked Archie; indeed, until quite recently, a day spent in rambling the prairies with him in his new car would have been something to anticipate.

"Wait until I get my car," he had told her twenty times that winter, as they skated hand in hand at the rink, as they two-stepped at the weekly dances in the town hall, as they sat under the big lamp in the corner of Mrs. Goode's living room. And the prospect had seemed a wholly pleasing one—until quite recently.

A few evenings ago he had come to the boarding house with light in his eyes. "I am to have my new car on the Twenty-fourth, sure," he told her, before they were off the steps. "Positive promise—delivery on the twenty-third. They're teaching me to drive an old one—you should see me give 'er the gas—so I can take you out on the Twenty-fourth."

"You didn't tell them that was the reason?" she inquired, in feigned confusion.

"No, I didn't tell 'em—but it is. Where shall we go? I suggest a day at the lake—just ourselves; it's so much chummier than being jammed in a crowd; then 'round by your mother's, say for supper, and home in the evening. What do you say?"

She had no heart to discourage him, and no heart to accept. Archie was a nice boy, a kind boy, and he

was obviously—much too obviously—in love with her. More than once he had spoken of the time when he would have his promotion to a branch managership, and she knew what was in his mind. She had looked forward to the day when he would ask her to be his wife; she had wondered when, and how, and where. And she had wondered what she would say. Curiosity, adventure, vanity, had tingled in her veins. But no happy anticipations stirred her now. Archie was still a nice boy, to be sure, and she liked him very much indeed. But she dreaded the question she knew was ripening in his heart, and she dreaded having to answer it.

"Yes," she said, with attempted gaiety, "won't it be fine?" Then, as though the thought had just come to her, "But isn't the Twenty-fourth the day of the ball game in Plainville?"

"Of course, if you'd rather go to the ball game—" he wavered, but his disappointment was so apparent that she could not hurt him—not yet. "We'll see," she temporized, and with that he had to be content until the very noon of the Twenty-fourth. It was just before twelve that she got her mother on the telephone, and, by dexterous inquiry about others, learned that Cal was not coming to town.

"Yes," she told Archie. "I'll be glad to ballast your new boat. I'll be ready at two." But she did not tell him that the chief attraction of the trip would be supper at the farm and the chance of a word with Cal.

In her little box of a room she dressed with unusual care. Sempter & Burton's store had been ransacked for a gown of sheathy, diaphanous texture, a little more daring in depth and height, a trifle more diaphanous, than the censors of Plainville would be likely to accept without remark. There would be lifted eye-

brows when she blazed forth in it upon the street. Its folds clung lovingly to her dainty limbs as she approved of her reflection in the glass. She admitted she was pretty. There were self-appreciation and a buoyant, girlish happiness in the admission. She loved her own beauty as she loved the beauty of flowers, of the lake, of the prairie dawns and sunsets. As she tucked her boisterous hair under the snug bonnet which she had bought in anticipation of much motoring her lips drew to a pucker and erratic dribbles of tune came whistling forth. They stopped as suddenly, and a cloud filled her brown eyes. It was a shame to bury that new, filmy gown under a drab old last-year's rain-coat. But a stenographer's salary had its limitations, and, as every one knew, it was the special delight of the weatherman to send rain on the Twenty-fourth.

She contemplated the old coat without enthusiasm. "Well, any way, I'll have it off in the house," she comforted herself. It was at that moment she realized she had been dressing, not for Archie Hale, but for Calvin Beach, and a sudden sense of something akin to shame swept over her, as though she had been guilty of a kind of disloyalty.

All afternoon an unhappy accusation of insincerity enveloped her. Archie was in the seventh heaven of his happiness, the two immediate ambitions of his life —possession of a Ford car and the companionship of Minnie Stake—having been achieved. She tried to react to his high spirits, but she had no gift of dissembling, and she knew she played her part clumsily. Her hand was dead, almost, to the touch of Archie's when, as though by accident, it fell from the wheel. Fortunately he was so enthused over his car that he failed to sense the artificiality of her responses.

Then there had been that revelation on the beach. A

hundred times she demanded of Fate why the world was not wide enough to prevent such a meeting. A hundred times she stormed upon Annie Frawdic for the duplicity by which she had gained Cal's company. She had heard a plausible story at her mother's, but she knew better. *She* knew why Annie Frawdic had preferred a visit at Mrs. Stake's to the ball game at Plainville. She never had liked Annie Frawdic, and she liked her now less than before. If there was one thing she despised it was duplicity—

As for Cal, she held him not too strictly to account. If he had kept his boots on she could have forgiven him, quite. Annie was a wily old hunter and it was not surprising that he had fallen into her trap. Yet Minnie was forced to admit that Cal had shown no distress in his captivity. Cal was a man, and men were like that, she supposed.

Gradually out of the mists of her resentment her own part in the day's events began to rise sombre and forbidding. She turned the whole matter over as she lay on her bed late that night of the Twenty-fourth, after the last rocket had gone whizzing skyward and the last Ford and its noisy occupants had gone rumbling home. The reward which, in the shadow of the screened veranda, she had bestowed on Archie for his day's attentions had been so Platonic that even he must have been baffled and wondering. She had had no heart for it, and she had gone to bed to think things over.

And out of the mists of her resentment her own behavior began to stand unlovely and reprehensible. No, not that; merely silly; she would not have it worse than silly. The silliness of the whole situation seized upon her and she laughed outright, and assured herself that her laughter was genuine and spontaneous. It all

had been very silly, but she was sane again and could see things clearly. Calvin Beach was nothing to her; nothing at all. An interesting person, of course; her father's "hired man," she would see him from time to time, and maybe discuss his air-castle plans for the remodelling of the homestead. He was interesting, and they might be friends, casual friends; they never could be more than that. As she turned it over in her mind she was amazed that ever she had thought it could be more than that. The fact that Cal was a "hired man" did not disqualify him; snobbery does not root deep on the prairies, even in the second generation. But it roots a little. To the first generation of pioneers the farm-hand is preferred above the bank clerk; to the second, the bank clerk is preferred, a little, above the farm-hand; in the third, collars and cuffs are in the saddle. But Minnie's mind was as big as her prairies, and class consciousness had no part in her appraisals.

The facts were as clear as daylight. Cal Beach, quite an estimable fellow, was working on her father's farm. He had stopped to work there because he was out of money; when he had earned enough he would move on again. He was a bit of a Gypsy. He had ability, perhaps; dreams, yes; money, none. He had nothing to offer but a share in his rumbling Ford and the foster motherhood of his adopted boy. Something about the thought of Reed made her heart beat faster again, but she quieted it; that, too, was silly. And she knew him scarcely at all, whereas Archie Hale—Archie was steady, and likeable, and he was saving some money. One of these days he would have his promotion; go farther west to some town in Saskatchewan or Alberta, just tent-pegging on the edge of civilization, and have charge of a bank himself. Then— Again she temporized. "We'll see," she said.

So she dismissed Cal Beach from her mind. But the next day, when transcribing a brief, for the words *casus belli* she wrote Calvin Beach. By great good fortune she discovered the error before it fell into the hands of Mr. Bradshaw. Mr. Bradshaw was a lawyer occasionally, a stern employer once in a while, but a tease and tormentor always. If ever it had come into his hands! She might as well have taken it straight to the Plainville *Progress*.

Friday evening Archie Hale asked if he might drive her home on Saturday. She wondered whether Archie was trying to intercept further activities on the part of Cal Beach's Ford, and she was most inconsistently annoyed. But there was none of that in her words or manner. She would teach Mr. Beach a lesson. That Annie Frolic—

"No," she said. "I don't think I'll go home this week-end. But you can drive me to Ferndale Sunday, if you like."

Ferndale was a neighboring town a dozen miles down the single line of railway which connected Plainville with the outside world, and between Ferndale and Plainville existed a bitterness of rivalry such as is known only by towns that are very ambitious and very small. But Ferndale boasted a good hotel, judged by Plainville standards, and the prospects of taking Minnie there as his guest for Sunday dinner, and of a long, circuitous drive homeward through the golden evening, sent Archie to his boarding house in tumultuous high spirits.

But as Minnie went to bed an iron band seemed tightening about her chest. In a passion of resolution she clenched her hands beneath the sheets, but the words would come.

"I wanted to go home," she whispered, fearfully. "I want Cal, dear Cal, my Cal!"

She lisped the words again and again, tenderly, like a mother crooning to her child. Out of a maze of strange emotions she began to know how tremendous was her confession, but she was glad; she felt the color mounting in her cheek, but she was not ashamed. She had come to an understanding with herself. It brought her peace, and presently she fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT WAS the second Saturday in June when Jackson Stake, junior, came home. Cal, quite unaware of the meshes which Fate was stringing for him, rode his plough up and down the long field of the summer-fallow, his broad straw hat drawn back to shade his neck from a blistering sun, his dust-dry voice occasionally raised in hoarse admonition to Big Jim and his fellow-conspirators, who had learned to know his moods and to impose upon them; his subconscious self busy with his furrows and the collapsing wave of pig weed and young mustard that heaved and somersaulted below him as the mouldboards buried it under ridges of rich, friable, black earth; his imaginative mind engaged with a number of academic problems, chief among which was an insistent wondering whether Minnie Stake would come home for Sunday.

He had not seen her since the unhappy episode of the bare feet and Annie Frawdic. Two Sundays had gone by; long, immeasurable prairie Sundays, broken only by a gap of church-going in the afternoon—and a walk home with Annie after the service. Very well. No doubt Minnie was helping young Hale consume his income in gasoline—

At any rate the experiments must continue. They had been making some progress. Jackson Stake had consented to order enough paint from the Square Deal Hardware to cover the bare boards of the two granaries. When the paint arrived it proved to be of a

glaring and unabashed red, artistic considerations having been brushed aside by the more practical matter of price. But Cal saw in this paint, in spite of its warlike hue, an evidence of the peaceful penetration of his doctrine into the large, thick heart of Jackson Stake, and he plied his brush with a will, working in the long, sunny evenings while Gander and Grit lounged in the back seat of Antelope and speculated on what the world was coming to. They had co-operated only by lettering a large and luminous sign, "Beech Bullevard—speed Limit 10 miles," which they surreptitiously nailed to the corner of Cal's granary.

A more important development, from the community point of view, was the painting of Double F's house, which began three days after the granaries were finished, and was popularly attributed to the boastings of one Hamburg Stake over the innovations being introduced on the paternal homestead by their university hired man.

"If Jackson Stake can paint his granaries I can paint my whole outside," Double F had declared, "and if there's any color you can see farther than red, lead me to it." With a message of such import Hamilton hurried to Cal, and sundry telephonings with the Square Deal Hardware, supported by repeated visits to the Fyfe farm on the part of Hamilton, resulted in the color scheme being revised to a base of white with trimmings of green. But even after the house stood resplendent in its white and green, old Double F would look dubiously across the fields to the red glare of Jackson Stake's granaries. He had the manner of one who has been restrained from his impulses by a sense of virtue and rather regrets it.

Then there had been the auction sale at Fryber's last Saturday—just a week ago to-day. Something ap-

proaching a domestic scene had occurred at the dinner table when Jackson Stake announced his purpose of attending the sale.

"More good you'd dig the rest o' the garden," Mrs. Stake suggested.

Her husband dismissed the idea as impracticable. "Too late," he said. "Couldn't raise a disturbance in that garden unless you plant it before the first of June."

Mrs. Stake slapped another fried egg into Reed's plate. "Well, you can plant a disturbance over at Fryber's sale, an' it'll be ripe in October—with interest," she remarked. "You'll buy some old fool contraption, or some dyin' or spavined crittur—trust you! An' sign some one else's note, as though you hadn't enough o' your own. But will you dig the garden? Not for the soul or sake o' you! They've perhibited liquor. Now if they'd perhibit auction sales—"

After dinner Cal had engaged the farmer in conversation as they leaned against the stays of the windmill. Overhead the galvanized blades shone idly in the dead calm of noonday and at their feet the empty water trough gaped reproachfully.

"Fryber is offering a gasoline engine for sale," he suggested, diplomatically. "It could be rigged to run the cream separator and the washing machine, and to pump water when the wind is on strike."

"The wife's got 'er knife into auction sales," the farmer commented. "She's always after me—" Jackson Stake spread his great palms with a gesture of helplessness.

"You could make yourself solid by buying that gasoline engine," Cal insisted. "Just drag it home from Fryber's and hitch it to the household implements, and

you've heard the last from Mrs. Stake about auction sales."

The farmer raised a brimless hat and scuffled his thin hair.

"How old are you, Cal?" he demanded.

"Twenty-six."

"You're old enough to be married. Any fellow that figgers as far ahead as you do is old enough to be married."

Cal experienced a sudden bounce of light-heartedness—the first for days. Toward the good-natured, irresponsible, slightly hen-pecked old farmer he felt a glow of real friendship; a sense of man-to-manness sent him to his fields whistling.

Mrs. Stake received the engine with conflicting emotions. "Haven't I told you not to go buyin' those fool contraptions?" she wanted to know. "I bet it won' go, anyway."

"Oh, yes it will, Mother," said Jackson Stake, with amiable disregard of her querulousness. "Start it up for her, Cal."

Cal started the engine and in a moment it was pit-a-pat-ing its staccato rhythm with the regularity of clockwork. Mrs. Stake watched it stolidly for some minutes, but slowly her face began to twist and pucker in unwonted lines and ridges. The stern old lips softened, the firm chin went quivering, there was a glisten of moisture about her deep, black eyes.

"Jackson Stake, you're an old fool," she said, but her voice had gone soft and gaspy. . . .

Cal ruminated on all these things, and more, as he furrowed up and down the fallow field that morning in June. Minnie had not been home for two Sundays. . . .

At a little before twelve Reed came romping over

the ploughed field, his bare feet sinking pleasantly in the soft, warm earth. The boy was tanned and healthy; his little frame stood up sturdily under his loose blouse and knickers. Cal took him up on the plough, and at the end of the furrow, when he had unhitched for dinner, tossed him aboard Big Jim's ample back. This procedure always instigated great noddings and champings on the part of Big Jim, and he marched homeward with the pride of vast responsibility and an ostentatious jingling of his trace-chains.

It was not until, a little later than the others, he was seated at the dinner table that Cal became aware of an additional presence. At Jackson Stake's right sat a tall, dark man; a man of thirty, or thereabouts; stouter than Gander, and without the peripatetic Adam's apple, but otherwise bearing a resemblance that could hardly be accidental. He wore a suit which had once shown good material, now faded and sagging; a celluloid collar and a gorgeous tie-pin contributed an effect of comparative dandyism. Cal sensed that no welcome was being wasted as the business of eating proceeded without conversational accompaniment. True, a strange light gleamed in Mrs. Stake's eye as she moved to and fro between the kitchen range and the table, but she served the meal without comment.

Jackson Stake was in no hurry with an introduction. He had cleared his plate of salt pork and boiled potatoes and was deep in his helping of rice-and-raisin pudding when he halted a spoonful in mid-air with a sudden realization of his social duties.

"This is our boy Jackson, Cal," he explained. "He has returned to the parental roof after a perlonged absence, as the Plainville *Progress* would say."

"Glad to meet you," said Cal, cordially. The stranger nodded, and a quick glance from his dark eyes

intercepted Cal's as for a fraction of a second they measured each other.

"We'll be killin' the fatted calf this afternoon," said Gander. "Grit an' me'll get the hide an' you can have the hoofs, Cal—if you're fond o' hoofs."

There was no mistaking the open hostility of Gander to the new arrival, and, absurd as it assuredly was, Cal felt a sudden warming of the heart at being included with his two fellow laborers. It was the first time he had felt himself one of the community.

"You don' seem much pleased that your brother's come home, an' him away ten years an' more," said Mrs. Stake, with a dry voice. The unhappy old woman was on the horns of a divided family.

"Oh, yes I am," said Gander. "I'm tickled to death. Can't hardly keep from kissin' him, right here before the comp'ny. An' so wise he's grown, too! Didn't come 'till the work o' the seedin's over, an' he'll be leavin' before the harvest begins."

The stranger turned his dark eyes on Gander. They were quiet, strong eyes, hintful of power and, perhaps, of hardness. When he spoke his voice was poised, easy, unruffled.

"Honk for us, Gander," he suggested.

The taunt drew the color up through Gander's sun-tanned cheeks; his muscles bulged, quivering; he half rose from his chair. For a moment Cal expected instant hostilities.

"Come, cut it out!" said Jackson Stake, who could assert a blunt authority on occasion. "Bygones is bygones, an' if Jackie wants to stay with us now he can stay, an' welcome. But there'll be no dead calf about it, an' he'll take his share o' the work or find a new boardin' house. Does that go, Jackie?"

"Suits me," said Jackson, junior, shoving his chair

back and rising from the table. "It wasn't *me* that suggested veal, if you remember."

Cal made a quick appraisal of him. "He has too much head for Gander," he noted, "and Gander may try to make up the difference with a heavy fist. Nothing makes a man so quick with his hands as being a little slow with his head."

The meal broke up in chilly weather. Meals at Jackson Stake's, at best, were hardly to be described as social functions. They were business events, unavoidable interruptions to the serious occupations of the day, like oiling a tractor, but an under-current of goodwill and hospitality usually relieved their stark utilitarianism. They would end with a word of banter or of far-fetched humor; a thrust at Cal's university education, at Reed's prodigious appetite, at Jackson Stake's expanding waist-line, at Hamilton's weakness for Elsie Fyfe. . . . To-day the men rose from their places and shuffled out in silence.

Cal added this development to matters under contemplation during the afternoon. It was plain that the coming of Jackson Stake, junior, marked a new epoch in life on the family homestead; here was an important contribution to his growing list of exhibits. Evidently the presence of the first-born was not expected to bring much glory to the paternal name. Cal remembered how Jackson Stake, senior, in appearing to reprove Gander, had really seized the opportunity to endorse, for the benefit of "Jackie," the scriptural maxim that in the sweat of his brow he should earn his bread. The old man was not so slow in a pinch. Hamilton and Grit had discreetly kept out of the discussion. He wondered what Minnie would say. He wondered if she would come home for Sunday, and if that Hale would bring her. He wondered if she had deliberately

kept away from the farm on his account. He wondered if she were jealous of Annie Frawdic! That last was a wonder to take note of; it was not merely an idea; it was a possible weapon, a means of attack and defense. He scrutinized it for a full round of the summer-fallow; then set it aside as something to fall back upon in a moment of emergency.

Minnie came home that evening. "That" Hale brought her in his Ford, which he drew up, perhaps by accident, by the side of Antelope. The contrast between Archie's bright new machine, shining in the evening sunlight, and Antelope's battered body with her drooping fenders hanging in dog-eared apology over carbuncular tires struck Cal's imagination as being also the contrast between Archie's spick-and-span store suit and his own flapping overalls and scuffed boots. And a tiny, strange speck of color burned in Cal's cheeks as he realized that all the liberalism of his sociological training had not raised him above a pang of jealousy. Minnie had no monopoly on that weakness.

Archie's Ford had arrived and Minnie had gone into the house while Cal was busy with his horses. He made a practice of giving them a little extra rub down on Saturday night by way of acknowledgment of a week's work well done. In the early dusk of the stables he curried Big Jim's fetlocks while up and down the length of the mangers came the sound of oats being munched with equine gusto and satisfaction.

It fell to Reed to break the big news. "Oh, Daddy X," he cried, bursting in from the outer sunshine, "Minnie's here, and that man that was with her when we were down at the lake, when you were wading with Miss Frolic—Miss Frawdic, I mean. Don't you remember?"

Cal remembered, and said so. "You seem quite excited about it," he added, shortly.

Reed looked at him for a moment, puzzled and crestfallen, then slipped quietly out of the stable. He had barely disappeared when a stab went skewering through Cal's heart. For the first time in his life he had fallen short of Reed's estimate of him; had failed to answer enthusiasm with enthusiasm.

"Fool's business," said Cal to himself. "In my irritation over Minnie I snub Reed. I must make it up to him—"

He was at no pains to meet either Minnie or Archie Hale, but a few minutes later he found Reed sitting beside the granary with Trixie in his arms. The boy had turned from one source of affection to another.

"Come on, Old Indian," said Cal, taking him gently by the shoulder. "It's early yet. What do you say to a swim in the lake?"

A moment later they had Antelope sputtering and were off on their way down the old trail to the lake. Through the kitchen window, where she had furtively been keeping watch, Minnie saw them go. . . .

The water was calm and warm, mirroring the purple and mauve of the summer sky, and it slipped deliciously about their young limbs as they swam out from the shore, and back. A week in the hot, dusty fields made its touch a luxury such as Cal had never known in the days of bathtubs and "conveniences." Afterwards they sat on the sand until they were dry, while Trixie, who had shared in the plunge, shook her long hair unconscionably close to their pile of crumpled clothing.

Suddenly Reed sprang to his feet. "Let's build a fire and have a story, Daddy X!" he cried. But Cal had begun to feel an unaccountable impatience to go

back to the farm. He wondered whether Archie Hale had gone home yet.

"Sure, we'll have a fire and a story—up at the granary," said Cal. "We'd better be going home now; it's a bad road for after dark," he explained, and marvelled at his own sophistry.

The long twilight of the Manitoba evening had faded into a segment of steel dipped in champagne by the time Cal and Reed were back at the farm buildings. Archie Hale's new Ford was gone—somewhat to Cal's surprise—and the homestead lay hushed in silence save for the contented sighing of the cows drowsing in a wedge of blue smoke from the smudge at the corral. From beside the horse stable came the red glow of Gander's pipe, and the yellow light from the kitchen window disclosed Jackson Stake, senior, busy with his bed-time repast of young onions and buttermilk.

While Reed brought an armful of small sticks from the wood-pile Cal arranged his cushions at the granary door. In a few minutes a finger of fire was toying through wraiths of orange-yellow smoke curling through the still air.

"Did I ever tell you about the trouble between the cloud and the shadow?" Cal asked, when they were seated comfortaby and the crackle of fire played pleasantly in their ears. "No? Oh, that was a great trouble. So silly, too, as most of our troubles are when you go to the bottom of them.

"You see, it was like this: The cloud used to be born every afternoon, somewhere in the southwest, and used to come steering her ship softly through the blue lake that we call the sky. She was very proud of her great white plumes that rose like majestic feathers from the

back of a mighty swan, and of the glisten of sunshine where it fell on her shining shoulders.

"But the cloud, like many beautiful persons, was very vain. Do you know what it is to be vain, Reed?"

"She was stuck on herself," the boy answered promptly.

Cal paused, taken rather aback by the glib rejoinder.

"Ah, I see your education is progressing," he continued. "Yes, she was rather vain, and she wanted very much to be admired. And so it annoyed her very much that wherever she went a shadow passed over the face of the earth, darkening its cheerful smile. And at last she said to the shadow, 'Shadow, why do you annoy me by going wherever I go, and by pushing yourself in always between Earth and me? Why don't you go away by yourself, so that Earth may admire me? Surely the world is big enough for us both!'

"But the shadow said, 'Earth loves me more than she does you, and I will not leave her. See how the parched flowers open at my caress! Hear how the wheat whispers under the touch of my fingers! Earth loves me, and I will not give her up.'

"Then the cloud gathered all her friends together, until a great squadron of them came sailing through the sky. And as they came they touched elbows, closed ranks, and began to shoot their little bullets of rain at the shadow below. But the shadow took the onslaught in silence; did not answer, did not strike back."

Cal paused, aware of a presence. From the gloom by the side of the granary young Jackson Stake emerged; passed through a segment of the circle of light, his dark face strangely sinister in the red glow; disappeared again in the darkness.

"Then the cloud grew more angry than ever because the shadow would not fight back, and she called up

her artillery under General Lightning and Colonel Thunder, and my, but didn't they raise a clatter! They blazed and bellowed and poured until it seemed the poor shadow must be driven to surrender. But the shadow never answered a word, and all the time she grew deeper and blacker, and so she grew until she seemed to cover all the world, until at length, look where she would, the cloud could not see a ray of sunshine in all the earth. And the cloud wept as she had never wept before, to think that all the earth had become so dark and foreboding.

"But the cloud would not give up, and so she carried on her fight until she could fight no longer; all her beautiful plumes were gone; all her loveliness had disappeared; she had exhausted herself; she vanished into thin air. And then a wonderful thing happened. Just as the cloud vanished the shadow also vanished, and all the earth lay steeped in sunshine."

"What does it mean, Daddy X?" said Reed, when Cal had been silent for some minutes.

"I don't know. Just a story. But I suppose it means that jealousy makes its own shadows—its own troubles. And when jealousy disappears the shadows disappear, too. I reckon that's what it means. Now say your verse and slip away to bed."

He held the child a moment in his arms; then turned to his fire and his pipe. But Reed had barely gone when there was a soft rustle in the darkness and Minnie Stake stood beside him. He sprang to his feet, remembering in the moment how absolutely their first meeting was being duplicated.

"I've been eavesdropping again," she said. "May I sit down?"

Reed had taken one of the cushions, as an installment of his bed. Cal eagerly brushed the end of the

remaining cushion with his hand and they sat down together. He pushed the glowing sticks in to a little pile and a finger of flame thrust up again to toy with the smoke-wraiths in the silent air. The light glowed on the girl's face; danced entangled in her rippling hair; touched with its soft caress the shadows of her throat; limned the alluring lines of her young body and glistening on the sheen of her stockings as she stretched her toes toward the fire. Of a sudden Cal felt his pulses racing and knew that the barriers which their stubbornness had built between them had collapsed and restrained them less to-night than if they had never been. This girl—what of the world, of his station, of his ambitions, of his poverty, of the cloud which had sent him to the open spaces? His sociological experiment, beginning as the half-humorous pastime of a season, had grown to be a matter of life and death, of all things desirable. Her presence flooded him with a witchery of wild imaginations.

For a moment he would not trust himself with words.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I HAVE been eavesdropping again," she repeated, when he did not speak. "Are you angry?"

"Angry? How could I be angry? But it is a dangerous practice; you never can tell—"

"What I may hear? I have to take that chance. Do you remember what you were saying—what I heard?"

He groped in his mind, but it had gone surging. There was nothing solid on which he could lay his hand.

"You were saying that jealousy makes its own troubles, and that when jealousy goes the troubles go, too. And I knew you must have been thinking—what I've been thinking—or you wouldn't have said that."

She turned to him her face, warm and inviting with a radiance not entirely of the fire, and it was with an effort he refrained from reaching out and touching it, from drawing her lips to his. It would be folly, he knew, but a folly more entrancing than all the wisdom of the world.

"So that's what you've been thinking," he managed to say.

"For three weeks. Cal, I've been so unhappy. I—Was there anything in that—that incident, you know, down at the lake?"

"You mean in the fact that I was there with Annie Frawdic?"

"Yes."

"No more than in the fact that you were there with Archie Hale."

She was silent for a moment, the heel of her shoe digging meanwhile in the hard earth before the fire.

"Yes, I know you see it that way," she conceded. "But it's a little different. Archie and I are old friends—"

"And good friends."

"And good friends. But not so good as that—"

"How, 'So good as *that?*' "

"Well, don't you see, he's gone home—early?"

She was talking in enigmas. "I can't follow you," he confessed.

"Then I'll be blunt. I sent him home early, don't you see, so that I could—that we could—" She was floundering.

"You saw me go to the lake?" he asked.

"Yes, and wished I might have gone, too," she said.

Her amazing frankness threatened his undoing. With an effort he held his poise. When he spoke it was with forced calmness.

"Why do you say these things to me?" he asked.

It was as though in some way he had thrust out and repulsed her. She did not move, yet he experienced a sense of her drawing away from him.

"I thought you would be interested," she said, very quietly.

"I *am* interested; tremendously interested. Minnie, if things were different—if I were in a position—I would tell you how much I am interested."

"But as things are—?"

He spread his open palms before him. "You know," he said.

They fell silent then, and the fire again died down before them.

"My brother has come home," she said at length, as though seeking a change of topic. "He was asking me about you—and Reed."

"You can't have seen much of him yet. I am flattered by his interest." He did not mean his words to be so hard as they sounded.

"Just a few minutes. You see, I hadn't seen him for ten years—more than ten years. I was a little girl then, going to school." She paused as though to call up the picture. "But we always have looked on him as a sort of black sheep; I don't know why, except that he went away and stayed—seemed to drop us out of his life. He always was different from the rest of us; is yet. Didn't you see it?"

"Yes, I could see that he was different," said Cal. "And he was interested in me?"

"Oh, he was asking about everybody, you know. He seems to be at war with everybody, because the first thing he said to me was, 'I suppose you'll have your little knife into me, too.' There was something tragic about it. 'Not till I know you better,' says I, which was a funny answer, don't you think?"

"Rather," Cal agreed. "It's bad enough to be alone in the world, without being at war with it, too."

She shot a quick glance at him, and for an instant their eyes met.

"But you are not alone," she said, with her keen intuition of his meaning. "You have Reed, and—" She paused. "Father and mother think a great deal of you, and so does Gander, for all his banter about your boulevard and your education, and you're a hero in Ham's eyes. Ham doesn't say very much, but he thinks a great deal, and I know."

"That leaves just one member of the family unclassified."

"Then there's Annie Frolic," she added.

He ignored the thrust; an exploratory thrust, he did not doubt. "You were telling me about your brother," he reminded her.

"So I was. He asked me who you were, and I said 'Calvin Beach.' 'Who?' he said. 'Calvin Beach—Cal, we call him,' I said. 'Where's he from?' 'Don't know, particularly; he never told me,' I said. 'Rambled in with his Ford a few weeks ago and held father up for a job.' And all the time I was telling him this he was watching me in the strangest kind of way with those strange black eyes of his."

She turned suddenly on the cushion, and her hand fell lightly on Cal's arm. The feather's weight of her fingers set him a-thrill. "Tell me, Cal," she said, with sudden intensity, "Do you know him? Did you ever see him before?"

"Never in the world."

She breathed more easily. "Something about the way he looked made me think he knew you," she said. "Of course I didn't know, and it may just have been my fancy, but I thought, perhaps, I should tell you."

He was following her move by move. She had thought that possibly he was in danger; she had come to tell him.

"He was interested, too, in Reed," she went on. "Asked me who the boy was. I told him he was your sister's child. That was right, wasn't it? Then he asked his name, and I told him 'Reed Beach,' and he said how could that be if he was your sister's child, and I couldn't tell him."

The fire had dulled to a glow in which he sensed, rather than saw, her figure. Her face was turned away. So this was her problem, and his. For a second time he had been confronted with this inconsistency. Min-

nie had expressed no doubt of her own, but it was impossible to suppose she had not wondered. He must give her an explanation, not an evasion; he must make and pidgeon-hole where it would always be ready for instant use an explanation that would turn the edge of doubt. The promise he had made his sister, the love he bore Reed, demanded this artifice.

"Listen, Minnie," he said. "There is one thing I have never done—have never felt called upon to do. That is, *explain* Reed. My friends must accept him, as they accept me, without question."

She turned her face to him again. "You need not explain him—to me," she said.

He stirred the fire slowly to give him time to collect his thoughts. Then,

"Reed is my sister's son," he said. "A short time before he was born his father disappeared, and was never seen again. We suspected an accident; drowning, perhaps, but never learned anything definite. No doubt the extra strain of this mystery wore Celesta down; at any rate she never recovered after Reed was born. At the last she gave the boy to me, and charged me to take care of him. I have done so, and will do so to the end. I adopted him and gave him my name. That is all there is to it."

Her hand found his; rested on it gently for a moment, then closed with a sudden intensity of passion in her strong, supple fingers. "You need not have told me," she whispered. "I did not want—I did not *need* to know."

For a time they sat in silence, conscious of a subtle new bond of union and of dumb swelling in their throats.

"He is about all I have in life," Cal went on. "Ce-

lesta and I were the only children. I have to think of him, always. You understand?"

"I understand," she breathed. But in her heart she was crying, "Oh, don't you see? That is no obstacle. I love him, too!" Outwardly, "He is a wonderful boy. I wonder if I—would you let me see him, as he sleeps?"

They arose together and he led her through the door of the little granary that served as his home, and Reed's. His heart was thumping absurdly, but above its uproar Cal could hear the rhythm of the boy's steady breathing as it came from the corner of the room where he slept. He found a match and struck a light. Its flame lit up the bare board walls until Cal directed it toward the sleeping figure on the floor. Reed was entangled, boylike, among his covers; an arm and his face lay bare and a foot protruded from under a twisted blanket. They leaned over and watched the sweet lips, the calm, placid face, but Cal watched also the eyes of the girl beside him; saw them moisten and fill and drop their jewelled tribute on the rough bed that was Reed's, and his. Then the match burned out.

They turned to go, and as they turned her hair brushed his cheek. It was tantalizing, maddening. It was black darkness in the little room; he could not see her face, but the sense of her presence was all about him. He stretched out his hand and it touched her hair; it fell upon her shoulder; he turned her toward him.

"Minnie—I know it's madness, and you will say so, and forget, but for the moment you must hear me—Minnie, I love you! I cannot ask you to be my wife; I have nothing to offer that you would have, but I can

be silent no longer. I love you, Minnie—love you—do you hear?"

For a moment she did not answer, but he felt her frame tremble beneath his hand. Then—her voice was low but clear and firm: "It is not madness, Cal. And you can offer me everything—everything that I would ever care to have."

"You mean that, sweet? Remember, I am penniless, in uncertain health—"

"You will be rich some day. You have brains; you have education. But it is not for that, but because I—I love you, Cal—"

She stirred toward him and his hands found her arms, traced their rounded grace to the shoulders, linked about her as he drew her to him in a sudden abandon of passion. His lips met hers, crushing forth that wine which is poured but once in life, a new wine that went reeling through his brain, to his limbs, to the tips of the fingers that held her in their clasp. The revelation of her love swept over him, held him speechless while she trembled responsive in his arms. He feared to break the spell; feared that the sound of his voice would arouse him as from a dream, and the ecstasy of that moment would be fled forever. When at length he dared to speak they were word-caresses that he poured into her ear; words of endearment, strange to his tongue, which now sprang to his lips as from some secret and unsuspected reservoir of feeling. She was his! She was his! And he spoke as though his own soul communed with itself. This was no stranger here; no one even so strange as Reed; only two halves of a single spirit, made for each other from the beginning of the world, mingling now and forever. That was the strangest part of it, that there was no sense of strangeness; this girl, this Minnie—see, her

cheek was warm, her lips were soft, her eyes were moist with the fresh dew of her confession, and she was his—his . . .

On Sunday it was his privilege to sleep comparatively late, and Cal found himself assorting and piecing together the events of the previous day. He lay in a glow of happiness from his knowledge of Minnie's love; his lips were yet warm with her eager kisses. It was a great thing to think about, this confession that had been his and hers, and which must shape his life henceforward from that hour.

He tried to think of it dispassionately; to follow, item by item, the processes which had led to his present position. Certainly nothing had been further from his mind than falling in love with Minnie Stake. He had looked upon her as an interesting item in his study of humanity as a whole; he had thought that she might give him some unusual side-lights on that most absorbing topic. Well—she had. There was something about this business that went deeper than the reason could reach; that was sure enough. Viewed in the light of cold reason his love was madness. And yet it was a madness more divine than the wisdom of angels. That was the strange thing about it. He was on an uncharted sea, sailing a course that had no end, no harbor; lost, and supremely happy in his lostness.

Environment, of course, had a good deal to do with it. But then, one can shape environment to his will—or her will, as the case may be. He began to suspect that it was no idle whim which had led Minnie to Reed's bedside. And as for himself, he might have lit the lamp instead of a transitory match, had he been so disposed. . . . What had environment done for Annie Frawdic?

The conclusion was that nature was wise and knew

what she was about. Nature might have presented him with Annie Frawdic, but Annie Frawdic had left him unstirred. Nature knew what she was doing and was not to be gainsaid.

All this was very satisfactory until, the first flush of rapture abating, he began to wonder where it would lead him. He had learned to look on life through serious eyes, with a realization that every individual is a factor in society and bears a responsibility toward the common good. And while nature might be wise in her biological selections, society also was wise in fencing her processes about with the conventions of marriage. On no other basis could society continue to exist as anything short of chaos; Cal had no doubt about that. The tragedy of Celesta and a million others like her was the price of disregarding the wise provisions of society for their own protection.

His thought flung back to Celesta in a gust of longing tinged by some new sympathy which he had not known before. He had never held Celesta to account; he had treated her deflection as something beyond explanation, and let it go at that. The blame he placed on her betrayer. For him he had found no shadow of excuse. With a curious pang he recalled how, particularly in those earlier years, he had sworn that if ever fate brought the faithless father of Reed within his power he would exact retribution without mercy and without limit. Latterly it had been but a sore memory, a sick spot in his mind slowly mending toward convalescence.

This morning he began to see things differently. Reed was the product of a law deeper than the puny fencings of society. Society was justified in its fencings but also it must recognize the deeper law. Reed was the product of that law, yet society would not recog-

nize him—if it knew. That was why he had to guard Reed's secret at the price of his other moral principles. If there was sin in the matter, the sin was society's, which, unable to enforce its mandates, took a brutal vengeance upon the innocent outcome of their evasion.

"It is as though a man stole a horse," he commented to himself, "and the police recovered the horse, but couldn't catch the thief. Then they would torture the horse for being a party to the crime, and as a warning to other horses not to be stolen."

He was pleased with this figure as he turned it over in his mind, even while he began to realize how far it had carried him from his original premises. It would be a great thing to set society right on the matter of this injustice. Society was kind at heart but it worshipped its prejudices as a religion. The thing was to break down those prejudices, and who was in better position to strike a blow than he? He had practical knowledge as well as theoretical; he had felt both edges of the blade. A pamphlet, a series of magazine articles. He might start a discussion. But always Reed must be protected from any suspicion. The articles should sell well; the public can be trusted to read avidly anything of which it doubts the propriety; there would be money—

This brought him back to Minnie. Of course he would marry Minnie; society's fencings must be recognized. It was a question of finding the money. Society, in laying down its regulations, had blandly disregarded the fact that it takes money to comply with those regulations, and not all people have money. Married life, respectability, legitimacy for one's children, had become things that could be bought in the open market—if one had the price. But to the man without

money what alternative did society offer? Here was the germ of another series of articles.

He must get money. He was faced with the fact that he could not remain a moral citizen of the community without money. He was working hard; he was earning what was called "good wages," yet he could not marry on them. There was no place to live; no place in which they could rear their children. Suddenly it dawned upon him that perhaps that was the real root of the shortage of farm labor. "We'd soon be short of lawyers, doctors, bricklayers, too," he commented, "if we adopted a social system which gave them no opportunity to reproduce. No wonder the skilled farm laborer has disappeared! He's dead, and his children have never been born. His employer wouldn't let them." Here was another series of articles.

The sun was pouring in at the eastern window and already warming to pungency the old tire with the blow-out where it caught the morning rays. Reed slept deeply on his back, his mouth wide open—against all instructions; his feet exposed beyond a corner of their crumpled blankets. Cal rose on his elbow and found his watch. Six o'clock. He yawned, stretched, kicked himself clear of the blankets, stood up on the floor.

Half an hour later, while he was currying Big Jim to the accompaniment of much business with hay and oats, a shadow fell amid the million yellow atoms dancing in the wedge of sunlight at the stable door, and Minnie entered. She waved a hand at Cal, paused a moment as though to make sure there was no one else about, then came up fearlessly between the horses.

"I have to go to town, Cal," she said. "Mr. Bradshaw has telephoned. An important case is coming up suddenly in the Winnipeg courts and there is still

a great amount of work to do on it. Gander has volunteered to drive me in."

"Gander is unneccessarily obliging," Cal observed.

"Yes, isn't he? Who knows but some one would have asked me to spend the day at the lake, and might, perhaps, have let me wade a little? The water must be warmer now than on the Twenty-fourth."

He smothered her banter in a quick embrace, while Big Jim, like the gentleman he was, buried his attention in his oat box. And neither guessed what strange links in their chain of events would be forged or broken before they met again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT WAS Tuesday evening when the blow fell.

Cal had been busy that day with his summer-fallow, and with thoughts of Minnie Stake, and of Reed. Practical thoughts they were; plans for his magazine articles; speculations as to the most likely editors; a slowly evolving idea of a series of articles knit together in a book. A picture of the book on the market; of its inviting cover in the shop windows; of fat royalty cheques to be laid, metaphorically, at the feet of Minnie Beach. He breathed deeply in the fresh breeze that stirred the dust from his plough wheels and was glad of the health in his young veins. The cloud had passed over; there was now no threat for the future in his expanding lungs.

His plans were beginning to take form, and to enthuse him greatly. The same divine urge which bade him bring order into the chaos of Jackson Stake's farm yard now stirred him to carry the battle into a much wider field. If he could bring order into the chaos of farm labor, if he could touch with one glimpse of beauty the sordidness which was expressed by "forty dollars a month and found"; if he could awaken to spiritual consciousness the physical life of which the Stake farmstead was typical, and at the same time gain a livelihood for Minnie and for Reed: that, surely, would be something worth while. His thought turned to a bungalow down by the lake; he could build it cheaply, mainly of logs that could be cut nearby, and the land would cost him little or nothing. Down by the lake

it was rough and unsuitable for farming; its only recommendation was its beauty, its solitude, its vast, slumbrous, brooding silence, and on these its owners placed no value. A few acres, with a patch that could be cleared for a garden and a cow; a brood of chickens; a log bungalow looking over the lake; a fire-place built by his own hands, of boulders gathered along some rocky point of the shore, and fuel cut lavishly from the dead and fallen timbers near by; such was the patchwork out of which he was piecing a design for the home that should be his—and Minnie's.

"We could live cheaply that way," he observed to himself. "No rent, no fuel bills, no 'social standing' to maintain, whatever that is; raising most of our own food, with fish from the lake and ducks and geese from the marshes; we would live simply and cheaply and happily. And if my articles don't bring in enough money for a while to meet our modest requirements I can take a job on a farm during the rush season and so replenish my cash while gathering fresh literary material." As he dwelt in fancy on the prospect he could almost feel the pungent wood smoke from his own fire-place in his nostrils; he saw Minnie seated gypsylike in the glow from the fire, or on the sand by the lake in the gathering twilight. He saw the little room he would build for Reed; the little bed, the dresser he would shape against the wall. He saw the larger room, rich in the dignity of simplicity, draped with the priceless tapestries of love, which he would build for Minnie and himself. . . .

"I must talk this over with Minnie," he said. "Might run into town to-night and talk it over with her. Haven't seen her since Sunday morning."

With this intention in the back of his mind he persuaded himself that it had been a hard day on the

horses and unhitched a round earlier than usual, to the great surprise and approval of Big Jim and his associates. During the unhitching process they assumed an attitude of extreme fatigue as a precaution against any change in their master's good intentions, but as soon as the traces were safely over their backs even Big Jim was ready for a flirtatious episode with the Molliemare who travelled next to him, and all turned homeward in high spirits.

Cal met his employer in the yard. "I've been pounding the horses through pretty steady," he said, "so I thought I'd knock off a bit early to-night and perhaps run into town for an hour or two, if you don't mind."

"Sure, that's all right," said the old farmer, genially. "Take an evenin' whenever you want it." A furrow of smile ploughed up through his big red face. "Take an evenin' off whenever you like an' run into town. Maybe you'll be takin' an interest in the practice o' the law?"

Cal measured him for a moment, then made his plunge. "Can't say I'm interested in the practice of the law," he said, "but I'll admit there's something mighty attractive about the law office of Bradshaw & Tonnerfeldt."

"Don' tell me, Cal," Jackson Stake laughed. "I wasn't born yesterday, an' I ain't blind, neither. This is more'n was in the bargain, Cal, but I ain't kickin'."

Cal took this to be the parental blessing, and mumbled something unintelligible. He wondered how much Minnie had told her father. But his hand in some way became enclosed in Jackson Stake's great palm, and the two men held each other for a moment with their eyes, silent.

"I reckon you haven't got much money to come an'

go on, Cal," said the farmer when he spoke, "but I reckon too you've got about a bushel o' brains under that ol' hat o' yours, an' you'll cash in on 'em sooner or later. I'll admit I never set much on eddication until you come here, as I sort o' figgered it spoiled a man for work. But I see now that don' always go. I ain't particular kickin' on you not havin' any money, Cal, if you know what I'm drivin' at. That'll come in time. I've made a few bones myself, an' I'd trade 'em right now for some things you got that you can't sell. By the way, I might as well give you somethin' on account. You'll be wantin' to go to the Electric Theatre, or buy some peanuts, or somethin'. Come up to the house. I think there's a bit o' money, an' you might as well have it."

The farmer insisted on paying Cal until the end of June. "Take it now while you want it," he advised. "There might be a hail storm tomorrow night an' then you'd have to talk wages to me from behind a shotgun. When I'm close, Cal, I'd bust a rib if I swallowed a flax seed, so take it when the takin's good."

Cal was busy pumping his tires when Jackson, junior, came by and observed him in silence for some minutes.

"Going to town?" he asked at length.

"Thinking of it. Like to come?"

"No. These jerk-water joints don't weigh much with me. Don't with you, either, I guess. You weren't brought up in Plainville."

"Not exactly. Still, I can enjoy an evening there now and again."

"So could I, if I'd somebody else's sister to jazz around with. Where'd you come from, Cal?"

Cal felt the color beginning to creep up around his neck. He resented this questioning and the veiled

but flippant reference to Minnie. Still, there was nothing to quarrel about.

"Oh, I'm a bird of passage," he said. "Just blew in."

"So did I. And I'm ready to blow out again. It don't take much of this to do me."

"I haven't found it that way. I rather like it here."

"Yes, you seem to have made a hit. You're ace-high with Dad and the old woman and some other members of the family. With me it's different. I'm a two-spot—spades at that."

There was something in his voice that recalled Minnie's remark about everybody having their knives into him. He was at war with the world.

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as that," Cal suggested. "Your mother is still pretty fond of you, if I can read her aright."

"Is she? Well, it don't get me anywhere. Cal, I'm broke, and I'm fed up on this Rube-stuff, and I'm due to beat it. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

He seated himself on the running-board, and the dog-eared fenders flapped him a precarious welcome. As Jackson rolled a cigarette Cal recalled Gander's prophecy to the effect that his erring brother would be no great factor in solving the farm labor problem. Evidently Gander's conclusions were to be justified sooner even than he expected.

"Have one?" he said, extending his pouch and papers.

"No, thanks. I usually take a pipe before turning in, but that's about all."

Jackson returned his pouch to a pocket of good worsted stuff, now frayed and broken about the edge. "Well, let's get down to business," he said, as one who had an unpleasant task and wants to get it over with. "How about lending me a hundred dollars?

That 'u'd put me back under the cluster lights and out of everybody's way."

Cal did a moment's quick thinking. What lay behind this complacent, even confident suggestion that he should lend this stranger a hundred dollars? There was a deliberateness about the manner of young Jackson which suggested that this approach was part of a definite plan. Why had he not gone to his father for money? But he must speak—

"A hundred dollars? I haven't that much in the world."

"You could get it from the old man if you went after it. He paid you something to-night, didn't he?"

Cal restrained an impulse to tell this meddler to mind his own business. There was something deeper here than appeared on the surface and he must move warily.

"Yes. He paid me up to date, and something over. I couldn't ask him for more at present."

"You're too modest, Cal. Always do your getting while the getting is good. But perhaps what he gave you would see me through. I could be in Minneapolis in twenty-four hours, and comfortably out of your way."

"But you're not in my way. Not at all. This country's big enough—"

"It won't be—if I stay here. Besides, I'll send the money back as soon as I hit a bit of luck. I got nothing against you, Cal; nothing at all, and I've made you a straight proposition. Come through with the green and I'll get out and stay out, and nobody'll know any more than when I came."

Cal was screwing a dust cap on a valve. His head was low, turned to the wheel, and he held it there for a moment while he considered these strange words.

They were spoken softly enough, in a manner almost friendly, but there was a hard hint of threat underneath. What was the fellow coming at? They might as well have it out at once.

Cal straightened up and faced him, a latent fire of belligerency fanning up hotly in his breast.

"I have no money to lend you," he said, "and there is no reason why I should do so, if I had. As for what you call 'a straight proposition,' I don't understand you at all."

Jackson did not move from his seat on the running-board. His face was calm, his voice deliberate, but there was a deep glow in his eyes that was hard to fathom.

"If you won't do it on my account, Cal, perhaps you will do it on Reed's?"

Iron jaws suddenly went clutching about Cal's heart. "How Reed's?" he demanded. "What have you to do with Reed?"

Jackson flicked the ash from his cigarette and inhaled deeply. "It's not a pleasant story, Cal; not pleasant for any of us, and I'd just as soon not go into it. Suppose you lend me fifty dollars and I'll be off on the next train to Minneapolis."

Cal measured him for a moment. "I don't know what you're driving at," he said. "But I'm not going to lend you fifty dollars. If you think you can get it from me any other way here and now is a good chance to try."

"I didn't want to tell you the story, Cal, but if I must I must. The boy is not what you pretend he is."

"Not what I pretend—? You lie! What do you know about Reed?"

If Cal expected the passing of the lie would bring

Jackson Stake to his feet he was disappointed. The man remained seated.

"I don't generally take that, Cal, but the circumstances are unusual. You may want to take it back in a moment. You ask me what I know about Reed. Suppose I tell you. You had a sister named Celesta?"

A tremor of something akin to fear ran along Cal's spine. It was plain that Jackson was not merely stabbing in the dark. He knew—how much? Cal decided it would be well worth while to find that out and changed his tactics accordingly.

"That's so—yes," he agreed.

"And Reed is her son?"

"I have made no secret of the fact that Reed is my sister's son."

"Quite so. But—*who is his father?*"

Cal's feeling was that of a miser whose hoard has been robbed; of a now virtuous woman whose youthful error is about to be blazoned abroad. He had a terrific impulse to fall upon this black scoundrel, to take his neck in his strong hands and twist it into eternal silence. The man knew about Reed! The secret he had guarded so well, which he had hoped to lose forever, was in this man's power. Why not seal it now—now, for the sake of the boy—

Something jerked his whirling mind back to a solid ground of cunning. He had to meet this problem brain with brain, not muscle with muscle. Curiously, even at this moment of passion Cal recalled his own philosophy about Gander being no match for this stranger, and about those who are lacking in the head trying to make up for it with a heavy fist. The thought sobered him, steadied him, brought him back to earth. He could be as dangerous as young Mr. Stake.

The secret must be kept! That was the one thing

above all others. Nothing else mattered. Reed must grow up free of the horrible handicap that society would place upon him if it knew. For that he was willing to pay any price. It was plain that this man knew, and his mouth must be closed. With money? The loan idea was blackmail—blackmail, pure and simple. If he gave him fifty dollars to-day he would demand a hundred dollars to-morrow. In the promise to go away and keep silence Cal had no faith whatever. The creature would keep silence only so long as he found it profitable so to do.

On the other hand, if Cal attacked this man, if he thrashed him as he should, explanations would be demanded and the secret would be out. With a blow that seemed to stop his heart it came to Cal that there would be no safety while this man lived. . . . Still, he must feel his way; he must temporize.

"I can't guess what you may know about Reed," he said, "or why you should ask me a question like that. It is, of course, none of your business. That is the obvious answer. But apparently you think you have information which you can sell to me and that I will pay you for keeping quiet. Before I can decide on that I must know what the information is. What do you know about Reed, and why should I pay you for silence?"

Jackson laughed uneasily. "You carry it well, Cal," he said. "If I had your poker face I wouldn't be holding you up for a measly fifty dollars. I'd go after bigger game. However, when the big fish ain't biting one has to play for the small ones. I thought I'd told you enough, and you wouldn't be curious about the details."

"I want to know the whole thing. If I'm to pay you money I want to know what I am paying it for."

"Sit down, Cal," said Jackson, after a moment, making room for him on the running-board. "I ain't proud of my part in this story, as perhaps you can guess, but I ain't as sorry, either, as you'll think I ought to be. That's human nature and there's no use arguing about it. I met your sister when she was eighteen or nineteen—"

"*You* met her?"

"Yep. Mighty catchy looking girl and I fell for her right away. I wasn't much more than a kid myself, you understand. She spoke of you often—that's how I knew it was you when I heard your name here; Cal Beach isn't so common but that it 'u'd make one pick up the connection—but she never let me come 'round to her place and never let me see you. Not that I had any hankering to see you, you understand. Guess she knew I was a sort of black sheep from the first and wanted to keep the family name as clean as the circumstances would permit."

Cal listened to this amazing recital too stunned to feel its force. Afterwards he wondered at that moment he had not twisted Jackson Stake's head from his shoulders. But at the time the suddenness, the brazenness, of the revelation held him dumfounded. It was not until the sneer in Jackson's confession—if he could call it a confession—it was not until the sneer upon Celesta began to emerge from the tangled debris of his life's wreckage that Cal felt the sting of the blow. The blood rushed to his head and brought him, reeling, to his feet.

"You dog!" he cried. "You cur! I've a mind to choke your insults down your throat, here and now. You—you murderer! Yes, murderer; that's the word. Murderer, and worse than murderer, of my sister! I

could take your life, but it wouldn't settle the score; it isn't worth a hair of her head. You—you—"

"Hot words, Cal. Calm yourself. I told you I wasn't proud of my part, but you insisted on the facts. You got 'em. But there's one fact which doesn't seem to be quite clear to you; the fact that it is I who hold the whip hand in this little controversy. Just lay so much as a finger on me and no price you can offer will keep me from telling Minnie, at any rate. I haven't been a model brother, but I owe her that much and I'll pay it. So sit down and keep quiet."

Cal obeyed. There was nothing else to do. The hypocrisy of Jackson's pretence of protecting Minnie nauseated him, but there was nothing to do but keep silence. And keep his head. He was playing with too shrewd a gamester to lose his head.

"And I wasn't insinuating against Celesta—not at all. Celesta was a good girl. But she seemed to recognize the black sheep in me and there's a kink in human nature that makes the good girl and the black sheep an awful bad combination. She'd have given her soul for me, I reckon, and I admit I thought more of her than of most of them. I was mighty sorry over it all, but it couldn't be helped then, and there was no use standing around weeping about it."

Cal's sarcasm burst his restraint. "That is the one thing you allowed Celesta's other friends to do for her," he commented. "And now you expect for this little service to the family I'll make a good fellow of you and present you with my summer's wages?"

"Well—I wouldn't put it just that way. I thought this country would be a little small for us, and the simplest thing would be for you to stake me to a railway ticket and I'd put a lot of land between us. Of course, there are other ways—"

"You're right—there are other ways. Listen to me, Stake. When I sat by my sister in those last hours—when I followed her alone to the cemetery, I swore before God that if ever I met the man responsible for it I'd have his life for hers. And I haven't entirely changed my mind. You might chew on that a little, too."

"I know. You could lay for me and knock me out sometime when I'm off my guard; I don't admit you can do it in a fair fight. But that would call for explanations, Cal, and it seems to me explanations are the thing that would be particularly hard—for you. So *you* can chew on that."

In impotent rage Cal held his peace. The fellow had him; had him hand and foot, gagged and bound and tied to the stake. He was completely at the mercy of this blackmailer. It was an impossible, an unthinkable situation, but it was so. Jackson Stake, the transgressor, dictated terms to Calvin Beach, the injured party. The criminal had climbed on to the judge's bench and was grimly passing sentence upon his accuser.

Even as Cal reflected upon this amazing reversal of all that should be so he could not help being stirred by some kind of tribute to the cleverness with which young Jackson had played his game. He had pulled Cal into the pit which he himself should occupy, and was climbing out over his victim.

All that Cal saw clearly was that he must temporize; he must get time to think; he must keep his head. "Well, I'll see what I can do," he said at length. "Perhaps I can get some money from my friends in Winnipeg. I can't give you all my wages, you know."

"I'll give you till Saturday—no longer," said Jackson Stake, with the air of a creditor closing an account.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CAL'S first impulse was to drive to Plainville and tell Minnie everything. He felt that he had come to an *impasse* in his life where he must lean on other judgment beside his own. His house of dreams had collapsed, shattered by a blow under a clear sky, a blow unheard and unseen by any neighbor, and he was writhing amid the ruins. He needed ministrations; needed them tremendously.

On second thought he knew he could not tell Minnie. It would be a breach of his faith with Celesta, and with Reed. He must save the secret at all costs. How to do it—that was the question. Jackson had walked away after his ultimatum leaving him seated on the running-board while something pounded with sledge-hammer thumps across his temples. How to do it? He must think; he must think. And he could not think.

He remembered that he had said something about writing to Winnipeg for money. That, of course, was to gain time, but it had appeared to satisfy Jackson, and he must make the most of it. He did not know whether Jackson was still watching him, but he went to his granary and simulated the writing of a letter. As he did so Trix came in hotly pursued by Reed.

"We're playing a great game, Daddy X," the boy shouted. "Trix is a bandit and I am the Mounted Police. Now I have her!" But the dog darted between his legs and was gone.

To Cal the boy seemed to have come up out of a

mist. It was so strange to hear his voice! He sat for a moment piecing together events; arranging the sudden chaos of his life in some kind of sequence. Yes, this was the boy—Jackson Stake's boy. What had he to do with Jackson Stake's boy? Why not— For one moment his soul trembled on an abyss of depravity, but the next it was soaring with the gods. The little face faded before him, like a picture thrown out of focus; then came up clear and sweet and tender as the face of his dead mother, and Cal knew that, whatever happened, Reed was safe in his hands. He stretched out his arms, and the boy, surprised but willing, crept within them.

Suddenly a new fear gripped at his heart. Was this boy safe—physically safe—from the menace that hung over him? Since his first days on the farm Reed had had the run of the prairie. True, he attended school, but aside from that he came and went as he pleased and only the dog Trix knew of his comings and goings. With a snare of brass wire and a string of binder twine he would lie for patient hours by the mouth of some gopher hole, or he would ramble for miles in search of flowers or butterflies. But now—?

Cal resolved that he must keep a close eye on the boy. He knew only enough of Jackson Stake to know that there might be no limit to his audacity. He could take no chances.

"Let's go to town to-night, old scout," he suggested.

But they did not go to town. Antelope performed her rumbling ramble through the groves of poplars and down the main road beyond the school, but then Cal turned her nose along a side trail and away from Plainville. He had decided that he could not face

Minnie at present. She would read his secret in his eyes. He dared not face her.

Nor would he talk with Reed. After two or three unsuccessful attempts to engage him in conversation the boy turned his attention to the more receptive ears of Antelope, and his talk from that time was such as a boy of eight may hold with an automobile two years his senior. It had to do with badger holes and deep prairie ruts and gentle reproof of the various rattlings with which Antelope made answer.

The sun hung low over the prairies; the clumps of willows threw their lengthening shadows across the trail; the grass took on its vivid evening livery of green, and still Cal held his aimless course as a boat adrift at sea. He was fighting, fighting. And as yet he did not know what he fought. He was fighting to get the enemy visualized, to see clearly—

It was dusk when they again drew up at the granary, although a halo of light still hung in the western sky and filtered dimly through the grateful cloud of smudge-smoke which filled the farmyard like a fog.

"Home early, D. D.," Gander remarked, while Grit added some surmise to the effect that the staff in the law office must be working nights. But Cal neither answered them nor heard them. He was skewering the vile heart that had risen up to destroy his life; in his mind he was trampling under foot the lifeless body of Jackson Stake.

Reed, strangely perplexed by a shadow which he could feel but could not understand, slipped quietly to bed without so much as a suggestion of a bed-time story. For awhile he watched the outline of Cal's form as it sat, unusually bowed, in the door of the granary, but there was no receptacle in his young mind that could long hold trouble, and presently he and

Trixie were scampering the fields in search of butterflies. And a minute later he was asleep.

Cal did not light his pipe, and when Hamilton paused on his way to bed as though he would have joined in a chat he gave him no encouragement. Ordinarily he liked Ham, but to-night he returned his salute with a monosyllable. The twilight deepened; the red coals in the bowl of Gander's pipe and Grit's presently got up and moved away; the yellow oil light in the kitchen went out; even the contented puffing of the cows under their canopy of friendly smoke was silenced, but still Cal sat on, bent and bruised and dumb. This was a fight in which his hands were shackled; in which his feet were bound; in which he was snared in a trap. As he began to survey his problem with a slowly returning clarity of vision it seemed to him that never before had man been placed in such a position. He couldn't fight and he couldn't surrender. No sacrifice which he could make would buy freedom. Not even death. Cal had no more than his share of physical fear; he had young blood in his veins and that combative confidence which comes with hard muscles and clean living. But it was precisely because he could not fall back upon these primitive defences that the fight was so unevenly balanced against him.

At midnight he was trying to put it into words. "I'm not afraid of Jackson Stake—not physically," he told himself. "Quite the contrary. If I could settle this thing physically I would drag him out of his bed and settle it right now. But I can't. I can't go into the house and up stairs and pull Jackson out of bed and thrash him or be thrashed without an explanation. If I didn't explain it, he would. I can't do that.

"And I can't buy his silence. It would be immoral, to begin with, but I could overlook that. One doesn't worry so much about moral principles when his antagonist has a strangle hold on his throat; at least, *I* haven't reached that degree of moral exactitude. But if I pay him I will be only playing into his trap. He would take fifty dollars now—and another fifty as soon as I had earned it. He would simply live on me. That's his game. And after he had bled me white, or some time in a sulky mood, he would tell. Tell Minnie, likely. So even that wouldn't save me.

"Not me. Reed. Reed, and my promise to Celesta. That's what has to be saved. And I would give my life for it. But I can't save it by giving my life; that way, perhaps, least of all. The boy needs me and I'm going to live for him. I'm going to live for him no matter who dies.

"He will tell Minnie. When he is fouling anyway he will make his blow as foul as possible. And then Minnie will despise me, because I lied to her, and because—because—" Suddenly Cal's heart gave an extraordinary thump, and for the first time he sat erect. Minnie would not despise him! It came to him as clear as a voice at his side—Minnie would not despise him. She was that kind of girl. Let Jackson Stake do his worst; here was one pillar of his life that could not be overthrown.

But a moment later he saw the other side of the shield and the brief tide of hope that had flooded his heart went ebbing out again. Minnie would not despise him, but she would despise herself, and the effect would be as bad, or worse. "If Jackson Stake were to tell her the truth," he soliloquized, "she never would look me in the face again. Realizing the wrong that Celesta, and I, and Reed have suffered from her

brother she never would look on me again. That would be a situation that could not be remedied, any way whatever."

He rose and paced unsteadily forward and back before his door. He would turn again and again to look at the door; he had a feeling that he dared not leave it, scarcely an arm's length. Celesta's boy was sleeping there and the night was full of heinous dangers directed at his head. He must stand on guard. He half hoped that Jackson Stake, slipping suddenly out of the dusk, would fall upon him.

"By God, I wish he would!" he suddenly exclaimed, clenching his fists in the darkness. "Then I would kill him—kill him, and it would be over with. Dead men tell no tales." . . .

He toyed with it. It was a tremendously fascinating line of thought, and he toyed with it. That would remove the peril. With young Jackson Stake out of the way the secret would be safe, and there was no other way in which it could be made safe. And it would be justice. Celesta had given her life. A life for a life. . . .

Thrusting out his arm, Cal found the corner of the granary in the darkness and rested himself against it. His brain was reeling. The thought which had crashed into his mind was so foreign to anything he had ever thought before that it paralyzed him like a physical blow. He could imagine his terrified normal thoughts running hither and thither, shepherdless, defenceless, scurrying for cover against this black wolf of a new idea which had broken into their peaceful domain. Poor, innocent, inoffensive thoughts, scattered like children at the blast of war! For this was war—war! This was a clash of forces which could not unite and for which there was no solution except

the death of one of the other—Jackson Stake or Cal Beach.

"And it shall be Jackson Stake," he said aloud, and the words smote his ears like a voice from another world. He could not believe that he himself had uttered them. He, Calvin Beach, the sociologist, the advocate of order, believer that all this world needed for happiness was knowledge and understanding—that he should contemplate taking the life of a fellow man was absurd, impossible. He, the whimsical humorist who could make of all his associates exhibits to be studied under a mental microscope, subjected to a painless and entertaining process of intellectual vivisection,—he, to take another man's life? He reeled under the crash of that idea.

His lips were on fire; his tongue wallowed between them, cracked and parched and tasteless. At the door he listened to Reed's regular breathing; caught the sound of it along with the ticking of his watch and the thumping of his heart. Then he ventured as far as the water trough and drank heavily from the iron cup that hung at the pump. The first mouthful was as colorless as night; he forced it down like solid food rather than water. But it revived him, and then he drank refreshingly. He poured water on his head, on his wrists; he held it against his temples, he washed his hands beside the trough, and he walked back to the granary steadied, strengthened, sane. He had a feeling of having been dragged back to life after an hour of death.

He undressed and went to bed, but as he lay thinking he began to realize that his saneness was more terrible than any insanity. More terrible because it confirmed his insanity. Now, viewing the matter clearly, weighing as a sane man, almost as an impartial man,

he knew there could be no safety while Jackson Stake lived. It was not Jackson's life against Cal's; it was Jackson's life against Reed's, and between these two his choice was instantly taken. His decision clashed with all his theories, with all his fine principles for a society clothed in order. He began to realize that this was but an instant's revelation of the eternal warfare between the ideal and the real; between that which should be and that which is. He had to accept the circumstances in which he found himself; they were not of his making.

Even if he gave his life along with Jackson's his cause would be saved. He was willing to do that. It was not a too great price to pay for Reed's freedom and for his right to admission into the body of society. Even if Jackson and he should be locked in death the truth would be locked with them and Reed would go free.

The child stirred in his sleep; flung an arm which fell across Cal's chest; turned and nestled against him. Cal enveloped him in his arms and clung to him tremendously, as though Reed were his safety; as though the man in reality were clinging to the child. . . . "Give you up? You! My God!" he breathed to himself. "Nor leave you. Jackson Stake has no claim on my life, but I have a claim on his. My claim is due—overdue—and I propose to collect it. How? I must think about that. I have until Saturday. I must find a way."

Cal awoke early from a restless sleep and sat up suddenly, uncertain as to where he was. His mind seemed, during the night, to have gone scattering through the universe; now it came hurrying back from all the compass-points of time and place to occupy its accustomed citadel. As its units rushed in they ar-

rayed themselves in order and gradually he became able to think coherently. He pieced together the issue with Jackson Stake; built up the two walls of their positions until all seemed about to collapse again. Then, in a panic, he thrust the keystone into place; the great central idea on which he had slept; the conclusion that the world was not big enough for Reed and Jackson Stake. He saw it clearly now and knew that there was only one solution. . . . Besides, it was fair. Jackson Stake's life was surely small enough compensation to exact in return for Celesta's.

"And who has a better right to exact it?" he demanded of the tire with the blow-out which hung in the rays of the rising sun. "Who has a better right? Leaving Reed out of the question altogether, who has a better right? No jury would hang me for that."

Suddenly his heart crawled up into a heap, a little strangulated heap of crinkly tissue lost between his lungs. Suppose a jury would not hang him for that; suppose he might successsfully invoke the unwritten law—*he dared not invoke it!* He could not do so without revealing his secret. That would give to the infamy of Reed's origin a publicity a thousand times broader than anything that Jackson Stake could do or say. No; he would stand silenced in court, unable to speak a word in his own defence. Was ever a soul so helplessly in a trap? It seemed to Cal that all the concentrated cunning of the devil-world had been employed for his complete undoing.

"How say you, Calvin Beach; guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty, my lord."

"The first witness for the king." . . .

"The first witness for the defence."

"There are no witnesses for the defence, my lord."

"No witnesses for the defence?"

"No, my lord."

"Let the prisoner be examined. Prisoner at the bar, you are charged with the murder of Jackson Stake. You have pleaded guilty to the charge, and have been unable, or unwilling, to call any witnesses in your defence. The evidence against you is very strong. Nevertheless, it is the business of the Crown to assure not only your prosecution, but your fair defence. You must be able to open to the court information which has not yet been disclosed. Be frank. Frankness can cost you nothing. Tell the court what you know of this matter."

"I have nothing to say, my lord."

"You admit that you killed Jackson Stake."

"Yes, my lord."

"You had a reason—you must have had what you at least thought to be a very weighty reason—for committing such a crime?"

"I had, my lord."

"What was that reason? Possibly it may have been of such a nature as to ameliorate the judgment which must otherwise be passed upon you. What was your reason?"

"I cannot tell you, my lord."

"Most extraordinary. Listen, Calvin Beach. You are a man of intelligence; a university man, it has been established; a specialist, even, on the very problems of men living amiably with other men. You were employed on the farm of Jackson Stake, senior, the father of the murdered man, with whom you had no quarrel, and whom you have heard testify against you in this court. The reluctance with which that testimony was given was its most damning quality."

"Yes, my lord."

"You have heard the evidence of Mrs. Stake, her heart obviously torn two ways between a natural desire for vengeance for her son and a deep attachment for you. You have heard the evidence of the young man known as Gander Stake, of Wilson, the hired man, of Hamilton Stake;—all friendly to you but the more damning for that reason."

"Yes, my lord."

"You have heard the evidence—the unwilling evidence, I must say—of the girl, Minnie Stake. . . . Have you nothing to say to that?"

"No, my lord."

"And the boy, your adopted boy, your dead sister's child, who has sat in court with you through this trial, and who, on account of you, must go down through life branded as the protege of a murderer; through no fault of his own must carry the stigma which you have brought upon him. For the boy's sake—for the girl's sake—have you no word to say which can clear you of this terrible charge, or at least can make it evident that your mad act was done under extreme provocation? If that can be established the court will make recommendations on your behalf to the proper authorities. Have you nothing to answer?"

"No, my lord."

". . . . and may God have mercy upon your soul."

With his hands about his throat Cal sprang from his bed and staggered into the open air.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CAL had half finished with his horses when he dropped his curry-comb and brush and hurried back to the granary. The fear of the unseen was terrific upon him. Danger lurked about the head of the boy; a danger which, if he only could see, he might avert. He must find a way out of this hideous jungle as soon as possible, but until then he must guard the boy as an army guards from attack its flank and rear. For the front he had no misgivings. It was not from that direction his enemy would strike.

Reed still slept, his neck bare, his arms thrown wide, his legs entangled in a wreckage of blankets. Cal gently shook him awake. "Come, old scout," he said, when the big eyes looked up to his, wonderingly, "I want you to go to the field with me this morning. Hustle; we've no time to lose. See, let me help you."

Wondering somewhat over his early awaking and the unusual assistance Reed clambered into his simple clothing. "Come to the stable with me until I have finished with the horses and then we will go up to breakfast together," said Cal, and the boy obeyed.

The delay had made Cal late for breakfast, and the porridge course had nearly disappeared, when Cal and Reed came in. There they were, all of them, even young Jackson Stake at his father's right; Mrs. Stake moving back and forth between the table and the stove in a manner which always suggested to Cal a sort of domestic treadmill. It came as a sudden shock to him to see them all seated there, eating peacefully. Did

they not know the heavens had collapsed within the last twelve hours? He would have been prepared to see seats vacant, the kitchen in disorder; to have heard moaning and shouting and the sounds of a fierce struggle. Could they not sense that tragedy stalked among them? This outward peacefulness—

"Hello, D. D.," said Gander, cordially. "How's business in Plainville?"

With a tremendous wrench he brought his mind into action. They thought he had been in Plainville. Home late—slept late. Perfectly logical explanation. Of course. And his particular business just now was to make everything appear as logical as possible.

"Plainville is all right, I guess," he returned, simulating casualness.

"Legal perfession goin' all right" Gander persisted. "That D. D. business o' yours ought to help some now. *That's* what you learn at a university, ain't it?"

Cal was stuck for an answer. Gander had not been very explicit and to ask him to make his meaning clearer might have embarrassing results. There was such a thing as being too specific.

Help came from an unexpected quarter.

"Let up on Cal, Gander," said Hamilton, usually the most silent one at the table. "He knows what he's doing, and one high-brow in the family might help out the average a little. And it needs some helping, believe me."

"If I was you, Ham, I'd be takin' night courses from him. I see Ounces hangin' 'round Double F's. A bit of eddication 's what you need, an' D. D.'s the man to hand it out."

"The girls all fall for it," Grit observed. "Glad my ol' folks didn't send me to no eddication factory. Hard enough to keep single as it is."

"Humph!" said Ham. "I bet you'd marry one of those corset forms in Sempter & Burton's, if it would have you."

"Ham-m-m—burg!" said Mrs. Stake. "What these boys don' know now-a-days!"

"I bet it was different when Dad was a boy," Gander suggested. "He didn' know nothin'."

"He didn', eh?" Mrs. Stake flared back. "Don' you fool yourself."

"'Fraid you're gettin' me in wrong, either way, Mother," said the farmer. "Well, I didn' marry no corset form, anyway."

"Didn', eh? Well, I guess I'd as good a figger as most of 'em, if it comes to that. A woman don' keep herself no Venus raisin' kids and feedin' a hungry horde like—"

"Now, Mother, that ain't what I meant at all. I meant you had any fashion form faded out o' the picture. Eh, Cal, how's that for up-to-date? Can you beat that?"

Their banter had partly won Cal out of his mood. "Pretty good, Mr. Stake," he agreed. "It isn't to me Ham had better go for his lessons—if he needs them."

Young Jackson had taken no part in the conversation. Suddenly, "Post your letter all right?" he inquired of Cal, without diverting his attention from his plate.

"Oh, yes."

The business of eating proceeded.

"But what's the idea o' gettin' the little man up so early?" said Mrs. Stake, as she re-filled Reed's plate. "Should be sleepin' for an hour yet."

"He's going to help me hitch up in the field this morning; we've a deal on with Big Jim to that effect,"

Cal extemporized. "He can go to school from the other end of the field."

Cal was again under the cloud. His appetite was gone and a great vacuity filled his ribs where his stomach should have been. To avoid comment he forced the food between his lips and slipped out as soon as possible.

There was a short-cut to the school from the far end of the summer-fallow, and at half past eight Cal sent Reed on his way across the fields. Pausing on his plough he watched the slowly receding figure as the boy kicked up the warm dust with his bare feet, or as he stopped to throw clods of earth at a particularly saucy gopher. From a knoll somewhat across the field Reed turned and waved his hand, and then Cal started his team, marking with a glance from time to time Reed's progress toward the school. Before he had reached the other end of the furrow he knew that for the time being the boy was safe under the care of Annie Frawdic.

Then another fear encroached upon him. Jackson might go to the school. He might bluntly say he had come to see Reed home, and to Annie there would be nothing suspicious in that. Then, with the boy in his possession, Jackson might do—what? It was unthinkable that he would harm the boy physically.

"Then what am I afraid of?" Cal demanded of himself.

Gradually it came to him that he knew what he was afraid of. He was afraid Jackson would make a friend of this boy. He was afraid the man would set himself deliberately to win the boy's confidence and affection, so that he might have another club to wield over the head of his victim. To the threat of exposure if his

terms were not complied with he would add a threat to take his child away from him altogether!

"He will—over my dead body," said Cal between his teeth. But the more he thought of it the more he became convinced that this was an instance where the lesser law must give way to the higher one. In short, there was no outlet except by making away with Jackson Stake. The man's life was doubly forfeit anyway; first, by his betrayal of Celesta; second, by the baseness with which he sought to turn that fact to his financial advantage.

"It's a case of defending the innocent," Cal soliloquized. "If I must kill Jackson Stake to protect Reed Beach, then I must. There is no other way. I shall not be able to prove my innocence, but I shall be no less innocent on that account."

"But the boy—he will be stamped as the ward of a murderer," something dinned in his ears, and he recalled the imaginary court scene of his awaking moments. "Or some one—some enterprising newspaper, perhaps—may dig up the whole facts and expose them to the world. What defense can you give the boy against that?"

"In such a case I must not kill Jackson Stake; he must just disappear. I must arrange that. No one will bother much. They will just think he has gone again as unannounced as he came. I shall not kill him; no, no; but he shall disappear."

He set his mind to plan a scheme by which Jackson could be made to "disappear," and the facility with which it operated rather startled him. For the first time he began to realize that constitutionally he afforded the making of a first class criminal. It was a new thought, and even in his agitation and distress he paused to toy with it for a moment. Were all men,

then, possessed of a criminal instinct, held at bay only by fortunate environment and the codes of civilization? If so peace-loving a man as he could lay so dark a trap for his victim, what of all men? Was criminality the natural state? Here was substance for another series of articles.

Thought of a series of articles brought back with a rush the picture his mind had carried less than twenty-four hours ago—now obscured under the debris of the world—of a bungalow on the shore of the lake, and a typewriter thumping in the shade of a friendly cottonwood, and the voice of Minnie singing down on the sands. Since last night he had thought not so much of Minnie, but of Reed and young Jackson. Minnie had never been out of the background of his thought, but the principals of the tragedy had held the centre of the stage. Now they gave way and Minnie took their place. Her kiss was scarcely cold upon his lips, and the pulse of his young love, checked for the moment by this sudden horror, now leapt again like a thoroughbred under the whip. . . .

He would have to give Minnie up unless he did away—unless Jackson Stake disappeared. With that disappearance all the old dream could be realized. Only he would know, and the secret in his breast would be safe forever. Reed would grow up unbesmirched, and their own children, too, to be useful members of society. Was the life of an atom of polluted social flotsam worth the wrecking of that dream?—especially when the dream could so easily be saved for reality?

For a plan had suddenly taken shape in Cal's mind. It was sinister in its simplicity and effectiveness, and it seemed to have taken shape of its own volition. Cal had no consciousness of having worked it out; it had come to him—from somewhere. It was sent to him

in his hour of need as the one way out. At first it held him hypnotized in a sort of horror, as a sort of gruesome thing wrapped about and too horrible to be undraped. But gradually he ventured near, to touch it, to remove one wrap and then another. The horrible thing did not resist; it complied, it yielded itself to his will. Garment by garment, fold by fold. . . . There, it stood before him, naked, brazen. He seized it in a lust that was devilish and terrible.

With familiarity it became less repulsive and he cooled his mind to think of it dispassionately. It was no love of his, this strange creature of the mind which had folded him suddenly in its embrace; this was a creature of convenience, for the moment only. . . . It was this:

He would invite young Jackson to go fishing with him. There was an old boat at the shore; it would serve for such a turn. Fortunately there had been no open breach between them; nobody knew; nobody would think it remarkable that they should go fishing in the lake some evening after the day's work. Jackson would not refuse; Cal could suggest that it would give them a good opportunity to discuss, without fear of interruption, matters in which they were mutually interested. Few boats frequented that part of the lake and there was little danger of being observed. Then, as Jackson lurched to catch a fish wriggling loose from his line, he overturned the boat! He must have become entangled in weeds in the bottom of the shallow lake, for Cal, although he dived again and again, could not locate him. That would be the explanation. Actually, he would dump him out of the boat and quietly row away from him, mocking his appeals with platitudes about the way of the transgressor, and it being a long lane that has no turning.

Jackson might be a good swimmer, but by instinct he would follow the boat and Cal would wear him out. If he turned and struck for the shore—well, one can use an oar for more purposes than pulling a boat. Then —a plunge in the lake to wet his clothes, and who would question his report?

It was horrible, and he trembled as he thought of it, but it was the only way out. The only way to safety. A useless life gone to save lives that might be useful. An unhappy life ended that lives which were happy might continue. It was the only way. And even if there should be a struggle, and they should go down together, Cal was willing to pay that price. Who could charge him with any motive short of the highest? . . .

Meanwhile he must see Annie Frawdic. He could not explain, of course, but he knew that Annie would accept his word if he warned her against any interest that Jackson might show in Reed. He must see her at once.

Jackson, junior, did not join the family at noon-day dinner, having elected, it appeared, to go out on a shooting expedition. Gander conceded him no larger game than gophers, but Grit magnanimously threw in a badger for good measure. At any rate, the meal hour passed, and Cal was able to drown the erupting in his head enough to keep up his end of the sparse and shallow conversation. During the afternoon he ploughed as one in a dream, to whom time and space have become meaningless terms, but at a quarter to four he awoke, tied his horses to the fence at the far end of the field, and strode off rapidly in the direction of the school house. He came up just as the little building was belching forth its contents for the day.

Some of the children, as they pell-melled out of

school, recognized Cal and gathered about with speculations as to what could be at the bottom of this visit from Reed's "father." No explanation which Reed had been able to give of his relationship to "Daddy X" had left any clearer understanding in the minds of his schoolmates than that Cal must be his father.

"If he's not your father, who is?" demanded a pimpled urchin of twelve or thirteen, a leader in the moral crusades instituted from time to time against Freddie Frain, whose paternal ancestry was understood to be shrouded in some obscurity.

"He's my Daddy X," Reed persisted.

"Same thing," his inquisitor asserted.

Reed discovered that this conclusion seemed to establish his position in the community, so he accepted it as the easiest way out of a difficulty. This business of identifying one's father was more confusing than even the "seven times" multiplication table, and he was glad to be rid of it.

"Hello, Cal," said one of the bolder boys. "Wha' d'ya want?"

"He come to thee Mith Frolic," a freckled miss suggested from behind a finger in her teeth. She returned Cal's amused inspection with the wriggles of a fish-worm.

"That's it," said Cal, with a laugh, as he moved up to the door. "Don't go away, Reed," he called; "we'll go home together."

Annie Frawdic stood with her back to the door, erasing from the blackboard the marks of the day's labor and instruction. About her head swam a halo of chalk dust from which settling atoms fell like silver on a fuzz of hair no longer innocent of an occasional grey thread on its own account. Cal noted the cheap blouse with its threatened lesion just above the waist-

band at the back; the skirt, once smart enough, but flimsy and formless from much wear and many washings; the gap of spindling stocking, more spindling than Miss Frawdic cared to contemplate; the wobbly shoes with heels bevelled by the wear of country roads and the school-room floor, and something about the *ensemble* clutched him suddenly as poignantly pathetic. He had smiled to himself over Annie Frawdic's obvious husband-seeking advances, but now the smile seeped out and left him empty and a little ashamed. It was tragedy; the silent tragedy of the undesired. Another subject for his series of articles—

That brought him to earth again, but even as he crashed he flung a thought of wonder into his own being, so weakly willing to soar away on every cloud of whimsical imagining. Surely the business now on foot was grave enough for his whole attention.

"Good afternoon, Miss Frawdic!"

She turned with a start, dropping the eraser to the floor.

"Oh, good afternoon, *Mister* Beach. . . . Teaching gets on one's nerves, about the end of the term," she added, as she stooped to pick up her eraser. "Thank Heaven, I'm through on Friday. Summer holidays." Then, brightly, and with a challenge of badinage—"I hope you haven't come with a complaint?"

"Why should I come with a complaint?"

"When parents visit a school it always is because they come with a complaint. If you have not come with a complaint I shall know, more than ever, what an extraordinary man you are."

He was fishing, he knew, but he could not resist the question—"And am I extraordinary?"

"Oh, very. And so is that boy Reed. Half way

through his multiplication tables already. I suspect him of a good drilling at home."

Cal remembered his horses, tied to the fence, and hurried to his objective. Nothing was likely to be gained by encouraging Annie in loquaciousness.

"It was Reed I came to speak about," he said.

"So there *is* a complaint."

"Oh, no—nothing about the school. But I want you to help me, and to do so you will have to trust me That is, you may have to do something which doesn't seem quite necessary, just because I ask you to, and without explanations. Will you trust me to that extent, Miss Frawdic?"

"On one condition."

"And that is—?"

"That you call me Annie. Only the children call me Miss Frawdic—Miss Frolic, they call me—in school, for discipline. Outside they call me Old Annie. I don't look much like a frolic, do I, Cal?"

"No, Annie."

"And how can I help you, now that I trust you?"

"It's about Reed. I suppose you know young Jackson Stake has come home?"

"Heard it, but they say there's no great rejoicing."

"You follow the news well."

"Your city men never appreciate properly the rural telephone. Well?"

"This may be just a notion of mine, but I don't trust him, and I don't want him to have anything to do with Reed."

"I see. But how can *I* help?"

"He's not working; has all day on his hands, you know, and I thought he might come drifting around by the school and want to take Reed home. If he does—don't let him. That's what I want you to do.

And I want you not to say anything about this—to anybody."

They had moved down through the dusty schoolroom and now stood in the door, where the warm breeze of the afternoon fluttered in Annie's hair and the mellow light softened the furrows about her eyes. Facing, they leaned against the opposite door jambs, and Annie's vagrant toe again went tracing figures in the dust.

"If he wants to take the boy how can I prevent him?"

"Come home with him, too, or take Reed to your boarding house and I'll come over for him later."

"All right, Cal," she said, simply.

"Thank you, Annie." He held out his hand and took hers in a warm and responsive grip.

It was at that moment that Jackson Stake, junior, on his way home from a day's gopher shooting, passed along the road in front of the school house. When they looked out suddenly they surprised his curious study of them. He nodded, touched his hat, and went on.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE next morning Cal awoke with a feeling of blood on his hands. He awoke very early, and in a stupor as to time and place. The yellow summer morning had not yet dawned beyond a faint grey mist that blocked the window of the granary against the jet blackness of the wall.

His sleep had been uneasy; a rabble of strange imaginings had clamoured in his mind. Then, suddenly, he had awakened with a sense of blood on his hands. He stretched his extended fingers above him in the thin greyness of the pre-dawn, while the sweat started on his forehead and his body went cold and clammy about the ribs. He could distinguish nothing —nothing but a feeling of blood. Turning into his mind he found a vague impression that somewhere in his life—or it may have been in a previous incarnation; time and place were quite undefined—he had killed a man. He had killed a man, but no one had suspected him. The secret had been well kept, save for the blood on his hands. . . . It was Jackson Stake!

In an instant he was wide awake. He sat bolt upright; his eyes, distended, sought to sift some ray of meaning out of the darkness. Reed! He groped wildly to the boy's side of the bed; found the little form twisted in the contortions of childish sleep; thrust his ear to the lad's chest. The heart was pumping regularly, the lung rising and falling, the skin warm to the touch.

"Nerves, Cal; nerves," he chided himself. "If you are like this before, what will you be after?"

The sticky feeling on his fingers persisted in his imagination. "Beastly stuff; beastly stuff to have on one's fingers all his life. Nobody knowing but one's self. All the years and nobody to know, but always yourself knowing. Sticky fingers. That will be the hardest part."

So he wrestled with the inevitable until the morning sun again poured through the window in the end of his little room. Then he got up, washed his face in a splash of cold water, and proceeded with his work as usual.

He awakened Reed early and they went to the field together as on the previous day. As they left the farmyard, following the jingling trace-chains of the four great horses, he felt young Jackson Stake's eyes upon them, and knew that Jackson understood. The knowledge increased his alarm for Reed and he decided to take the boy partly into his confidence.

"How do you like young Mr. Stake, Reed?" he asked.

"All right."

"Does he talk to you at all?"

"Not much. A little last night, while you were doing the horses."

"What did he talk about?"

"Oh, nothing much. Asked if you often went over to see me at the school."

"Oh, did he? Anything else?"

"Promised to take me and Trixie—Trixie and I—and me—*me* is right, isn't it, Daddy X?—gopher hunting on Saturday."

"Well, I don't want you to talk to him, Reed, or to have anything to do with him. And if he calls for

you at the school don't come home with him; go home with Miss Frawdic, and I will come over for you afterward. Will you remember that?"

"Yes, Daddy X. . . . But I'd like to go gopher hunting."

"So you shall, but not with him." Cal was glad the child could not detect the grimness in his words.

He watched the boy safely to school and then continued with his ploughing, but as his mouldboards crumpled the friable earth up and down the field and the forest and thistles wavered and fell beneath him like the ranks of an army swept by volley after volley of fire, his mind was rehearsing an event now only thirty-six hours distant. He had definitely fixed on Friday evening. He had turned over every possibility, anticipated every difficulty, provided against every contingency. Yesterday he had settled with his own conscience.

"Thou shalt not kill," Conscience had drummed in his soul.

"But this is in defence of the life of a child. We kill to defend our children, our loved ones, our country. Besides, he deserves it."

"Vengeance is Mine," the voice insisted.

"And I am its instrument," he parried. "Oh, I would give the world to escape, but there is no other way out. Reed is not safe while Jackson Stake lives."

"Give him the money," lisped a new voice; a cunning, subtle voice, in his ear.

"That would be compounding his crime and his cowardice. That I will not do. It would be admitting his power over me. I do not admit it. I will not admit it."

With that the voices were silent, but this morning a new voice came clamouring at his heart. "Don't do

it, Cal; don't do it," it cried, with a mingling of entreaty and threat. "Think of your hands. Think of that, all through life, every morning. No one to know but you. You never will dare mention it; it will be a gulf between you and every other creature. In your body you may mix with society but in your soul you will be an outcast. To carry it all your life festering within you; never to ease its fever by mention to a living soul. Even from Minnie—from Minnie most of all, you must keep your secret, guard it close forever, always under the dread that a thoughtless word may reveal it. Think, Cal! A murmur in your sleep, a raving in an illness, and Minnie will know her brother's blood is on your hands. It will separate you from her like a wall; a wall which she will not see, but which will imprison and embitter her. When her love for you is dead you will not be able to explain, to revive it by one whisper of confidence and confession. You will have to hide it from your children. You will look on them in their beds and the horrible knowledge, like a wild beast, will come tearing at your heart. Don't do it. It will lay a plague upon you; it will brand you with the mark of Cain—"

"Stop it!" Cal cried, wrenching his shoulders as though in physical conflict. "I know you. You are Fear. Damn you, I'm no coward!"

Then all the voices fell silent and his mind drummed on in a sort of stupor, drugged by its own tremendous purposes. So he spent the day, up and down, no longer like a weaver shuttling the rich black carpet of the earth, but like a caged animal awaiting his hour.

As four o'clock approached he began to glance from time to time in the direction of Annie Frawdic's school. Sharp at the hour a swarm of little human atoms buzzed forth. For a few minutes they swirled

about the school-yard without giving evidence of any definite direction, like bees before the flight to the feeding ground; then a group of atoms detached itself and moved rapidly along the road toward the Stake homestead. Cal watched this unusual deployment with increasing interest. No pupils lived in Reed's direction from the school, and it was customary for him to come home alone.

Suddenly the approaching group was swallowed in a depression in the prairie, to reappear a few minutes later almost at the corner of his field. He could now discern Reed and another boy running ahead and six or eight more following closely behind. When they reached the summer-fallow Reed and his companion left the road and came directly across the field to where Cal, absorbed in the incident being enacted before him, had allowed his horses, ever ready to take advantage of a moment of weakness, to come to a stop. The pursuers followed for a short distance across the ploughed field, then slackened, stopped, consulted, and finally slowly fell back to the roadway.

As Reed approached Cal could see that he had been crying. His face was covered with dust streaked with tears and perspiration, for he had run almost to exhaustion; and from his lips a thin, red stream trickled down and across his chin. Scratches on the white flesh of his shoulder showed through a rent in the sleeve of his blouse. The other boy, slightly older than Reed, bore even deeper marks of combat.

Cal felt a sudden leap of the heart, a fierce primitive instinct for blood, surge through him as he sprang from his plough seat and met Reed at the horses' heads. But the assailants, watching from the safe distance of the road, raised a derisive cheer and broke into a run toward their respective homes.

"Why, Reed, old Indian, what has happened?"

But the boy's eyes were on the ground and for the moment he had no answer. He edged to Big Jim and laid a groping finger against the great shoulder, which shivered prodigiously as though in anticipation of a horsefly. A moment later Big Jim threw his head in the air with a fine jingling of his bit; then with his great, curious, affectionate lips muzzled the naked shoulder of the boy, and all was well with the world once more. Reed looked up at Cal with the glint of a strange new kinship in his eyes and a smile twisting his swollen lips.

"We've been fighting, Daddy X," he confessed. "The boys piled on Fred, 'cause he has no father, and I took his part, 'cause I haven't any either, have I, Daddy X? Only you, who aren't really."

Of a sudden the horizon swam before Cal's eyes; the long lines of fences tilted forward and back, like a ship in a stormy sea. The world was closing in upon him. Fate, having absorbed his attention from in front, now attacked him, suddenly and viciously, on the flank. The uncanny intuition by which Reed had allied himself with this other child of a like estate seemed to hint that forces more than human had combined for his undoing.

Cal pulled himself together. "That was right, Reed. That was a sort of chivalry. Do you understand?"

"Chivalry? That is what the knights—King Arthur and his knights, you know—used to have, when they fought in armour, and didn't care how many piled on—"

"That's it. Never count your enemies. Punch 'em instead. Better have a swollen face than a shrunken heart."

He turned to Freddie. The boy was a picture of

dejection, his face blood and grime, his clothing torn and trampled. Under a sympathetic eye the sobs with which he had been struggling burst restraint, and the little form shook in convulsions of misery.

"They're always doing it," he said, when he could control his voice. "Piling onto me. My father's dead—my mother says so. But they say I never had a father. One must have had a father, mustn't he, Mr. Beach?"

"Of course, he must."

He dried his eyes on the sleeve of his dusty shirt. "Sometimes they're all right," he added magnanimously. "Sometimes they don't seem to make any difference. And then, all of a sudden, they'll pile on to me for nothing. They call my mother a bad woman, too, and that makes me fight. She's not bad. She's good. Don't you think she's good, Mr. Beach?"

The appeal in the little boy's face wrung from Cal a sudden and vicious answer.

"I'm sure she's good, Freddie; perhaps a damned sight better than those who call her bad."

"Oh, you swore, Daddy X!"

"I know it, Reed. I'd think less of myself if I hadn't."

"And they say they know she's bad because she doesn't go to church, and that proves it. Does that prove it, Mr. Beach? She used to go, but she said they all looked at her so strange, and none of them ever went to see her, except Minnie Stake used to once in a while when she was on the farm, and my mother told her she shouldn't because for what people would say about her, and Minnie, she up and said, 'To hell with what people say about me, I'm coming anyway,' and then my mother cried and made tea and we had the dandiest time. And sometimes Annie Frolic comes over, too, but not so often, because she's always

on the hunt for a man—that's what the kids say—and hasn't much time for us."

With the quick buoyancy of childhood, Freddie's spirits were already returning, and Cal's own heart had gone suddenly aglow. "But you shouldn't tell things like that, that happen at home, Freddie," he chided.

"I never did, before, but I thought you'd like to know, because Reed said you and Minnie were great friends and how you sat on the cushion in front of the fire and when you thought he was asleep—"

"That'll do," Cal brought him up peremptorily. "Reed, I'm surprised at you. Now you two boys run up to the house and have a wash and ask Mrs. Stake to give you your supper, and after that Reed can go home with you and stay all night. But remember, Reed, no more tattling!"

Delighted, the boys broke into a race toward the house, and Cal resumed his ploughing. For the moment he had been almost happy. He returned to a contemplation of the inexorable web which fate was weaving about him.

When he went into supper the boys had finished theirs and were gone. The first gusto of the meal was slackening when Mrs. Stake mentioned them.

"I let Reed go with that Frain boy, Cal," she said. "He said you told him he could."

There was a note of challenge in Mrs. Stake's voice and Cal was in a mood to take up the cudgels.

"Yes, I said he could go. Freddie seems to have rather a tough time of it at school, and I thought Reed might cheer him up a bit."

Mrs. Stake ladled a generous helping of strawberries into young Jackson's plate before she answered.

"He's your boy, Cal, an' it's not for me to inter-

fere, but perhaps you don' know 's much about the Frain woman as the rest of us do."

"As far as I can learn no one seems to know very much about Mrs. Frain," Cal returned.

Mrs. Stake paused in her serving. She could be stern at times. She seemed more than usually tall and sharp; more than usually white of hair and black of eye.

"I didn't say *Mrs.* Frain," she said.

"I did."

"Then perhaps you know?"

"No, I just suppose. I believe in giving anybody—especially a woman—the benefit of the doubt."

It was Gander who interrupted. "I guess there ain't much doubt, Cal. She don' deny it herself."

"Deny what?"

Gander colored and seemed to have trouble with his food. His Adam's apple hopped about his neck like a panicky squirrel.

"Oh, come on. You know, Cal."

"But I *don't* know. What do you mean? What is it she doesn't deny?" He was interested in uncovering a code of ethics which could think the things that Gander was thinking, but shrank from expressing a simple statement in simple English.

"What is it she doesn't deny?" he repeated.

"Well, about her not being married, and all that."

"All what?"

Jackson junior came to his brother's aid. "Gander isn't a D. D., Cal, and his language doesn't come easy. He means that Mrs. Frain couldn't refrain."

Cal felt the blood jump to his face. Here was a chance—make an issue of it now—strangle those mocking eyes into an eternal stare. To think he had argued with his conscience about a man like that! But in

a moment his wits were in the saddle again. This was not his hour, and he could wait.

"After all, I don't see what difference it makes," he resumed, quietly. "If the woman sinned, she has likely paid for it. They usually do. More than their share." His eyes were straight on young Jackson. "More than their share. In any case, the boy is not to blame, and those young savages at school, taking the cue from their elders, are making his life a torment. I'm glad Reed has gone home with him."

"Well, I hope people won' say anythin' about it," Mrs. Stake quavered.

"Why?" Cal was busy empaling his exhibits on their pins and there was no mercy in him.

Mrs. Stake's voice weakened threateningly. The issue had gone from her head to her heart.

"Because we've always been a decent family, Cal. We ain't much for manners or eddication, but we've always been decent. It's different with you—I don' mean you ain't decent, too, but you see things different, an' I can't argue with you about that. But Reed is like —our own boy." Her voice was breaking. "I've held him on my knee, many a time, when you didn' know, jus' because my heart was somehow reachin' out aroun' him. I guess I'm gettin' to be an old woman, Cal"—she was talking to Cal only—"an' God hasn't give me any gran'children. If Jackie there— So I'm awful set on Reed, Cal, an' wouldn' like for anythin' that'd make any of us ashamed—"

"Don't worry, Mother. Nothing will happen that will make *you* ashamed. I promise you." It was the first time he had called her mother, and the word just slipped out from him. But the old eyes, which had gone wet, shone out again with a new light.

Hamilton had slipped away, feeling that the con-

versation was on dangerous ground. Grit and Gander went out together, to discuss under the friendly shelter of the stable in detail the deflections of the erring Mrs. Frain, and Cal's unexpected championship of her, and to put two and two together and speculate as to whether they made four. Young Jackson, always aloof, presently followed them, and Cal found himself alone with the farmer and his wife.

"I hope you weren't annoyed that I—such an unconventional one as I—called you mother," he said, when he found the old woman's eyes gripped on his.

"Annoyed? Why, child, every woman, at my age, hankers for that name, and for someone to say it. I guess that's why I'm so powerful drawn to Reed. Jackie got the best eddication of them all, excep' Minnie, perhaps, an' she put herself through, an' I always built on him settlin' down an' maybe gettin married an' havin' children, but he never did, an' Dad an' me feels we're gettin' a bit more alone every year. Now, a boy like Reed— No, I ain't sorry you called me mother."

"Because I hope to call you that, always, after a while," said Cal, boldly.

For a moment the dark eyes narrowed; then a faint, happy, fleeting smile flitted over the austere features. "You're thinkin' o' Minnie," she said. "I'm glad."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHILE ploughing in the summer-fallow Friday afternoon, Cal ran over a gopher. The hapless creature, darting out from the deep weeds, became confused among the horses' feet and ran directly under the sharp colter. Ordinarily Cal would have given the incident no further thought, but he had been living in the morbid side of his mind for almost a week, and this sudden little tragedy stirred him strangely. He stopped, got down from his plough, and rolled back the clods which covered the quivering atom of that which, a moment before, had been life. . . . When he passed by on his next round he saw it was already teeming with flies.

At noon he met young Jackson in the stable yard. "Any word from Winnipeg yet?" Jackson demanded.

"Not yet. There's hardly time. Maybe to-morrow."

"Well, to-morrow's the limit."

"If it shouldn't come to-morrow, what are you going to do?"

Jackson regarded him for a moment. "It had better come to-morrow," he said, ominously. "If it doesn't you'll have to come through with your wages. I'm not going to stick it here any longer. I'm fed up."

"You won't have to stick it any longer," said Cal, with a show of amiability. "I promise you. By the way, how about a little excursion on the lake to-night?"

"What for?"

"Ostensibly, to fish. There's a boat that we can

get. Actually, to see if we can't come to some sort of terms."

"You know my terms."

"Yes, but I've some terms, too. I want a clearance, so far as Reed is concerned."

"Just how?"

"I want you to sign off your claim on him."

"Don't think that would interest me."

"Perhaps I could make it interest you."

"Well—money talks."

"All right. See you to-night. Nine o'clock. Better meet at the beach, if you don't mind."

Jackson nodded and Cal turned to his horses.

Reed did not come home from school that afternoon, and Cal, scenting trouble, hurried through his stable work and started out with Antelope. To mislead Jackson he set out in a direction the opposite of Annie Frawdic's. Once upon the high road behind the poplars he altered his course and bore rapidly down upon the Ernton homestead, where Annie had her lodgings. There was no time to lose if he were to be at the beach by nine o'clock.

The Ernton buildings lay behind a grove of Manitoba maples fringing the northwestern corner of the farm. As the Ford loped along the short, leafy lane occasioned by this shelter belt, a sudden "Yoo-hoo" brought Cal to attention and his car to a precipitate stop. Half erect in a hammock under the trees sat Annie Frawdic, with one hand waving to him a welcome, while the other adjusted a skirt gone somewhat awry from her sudden change in position. A foot and ankle swung clear below the hammock, and, caught in a lane of yellow sunshine, cast an exaggerated shadow across an open space of grass and up the bare trunk of a neighboring tree.

Cal sprang from his car and cut short her salutation. "Is Reed here?" he demanded.

"Uh-huh. I brought him over, as you said."

"Then he's all right?"

"Of course. What's wrong with you, Cal? You're positively pale, if one *could* be pale behind such a coat of tan. I was going to say such a *lovely* coat of tan—"

"Thank you, Annie. I'm afraid I'm too much on high gear these days. And I was uneasy about Reed."

"He's safe as Sunday; gone for the cows, I think, with Master Jim. It's you that are in danger. I begin to think you need some one to look after you, Cal."

He tried to ease his mind of its dark load and to react to her vivacity. "I've known that for some time," he admitted, "but knowing it doesn't seem to help."

She swung the other foot to the ground. "I think it will hold you," she suggested, and he sat down beside her. Her face and hair seemed to take on something of the amber of the evening light; her eyes seemed full and deep; her angularities were softened and smoothed as by some mystic, gentle hand. He was glad to idle a moment or two with her, seeing that the night held such portentous doings.

"At any rate, my suspicions were founded," he remarked, when the rather delicate adjustments of their centres of gravity had been completed. "Young Jackson was around for Reed?"

She did not answer.

"What did he say? What did you say to him? Tell me about it."

"Well, it wasn't just that way," she said, after a pause. "You're some prize suspector, Cal, and I didn't want to disappoint you."

"You mean that Jackson didn't come at all? Then why—"

"Not really, he didn't. That is, not right to the school. But he may have been just over the ridge; you know, in the little hollow between the school and Stake's. I couldn't see, but I thought it better to take no chances, and so I brought Reed home with me."

"I've been very uneasy about him," said Cal, with a note of reproach in his voice.

"I'm sorry. Don't be cross. Besides, I was going to telephone you presently that he was here."

With a push of his foot on the ground he set the hammock slightly swinging. Annie saved her balance by clutching his waist.

"Yes, you might have done that," he agreed. "But why did you bring him at all?"

"Reed's a nice boy."

"Well?"

"So are you."

"Oh, thanks. Really—"

"And this was the last day of the term. To-night I leave for home. Perhaps I'll be here again next term; perhaps not. You old goose—don't you see?"

He spoke gravely again. "You wanted me to come over, Annie? You could have sent me a message."

"I thought of that. But messages sometimes fall into wrong hands. And the telephone is worse than the Plainville *Progress*. It was my little subterfuge, Cal. Forgive it, won't you?"

"Of course. In fact, the pleasure is all mine. But I'm sorry I didn't know; then I could have arranged it better. I've another engagement to-night, about nine."

"Oh, Minnie you have with you always. What's one engagement, more or less?"

He was about to correct her, but he held the words on his tongue. As well let her think that; it would take less explaining.

"You're going to-night?" he picked up the thread. "There's no train until morning."

"No—I'm motoring. Friends of mine, from the South; they're to call sometime to-night. It may be late, but they'll be here. I've everything packed and nothing on my mind. Say I look it."

"You look—no, I don't mean that. Annie, you're positively fascinating."

"Oh, Cal, what a dear you are! Even although I know you're lying, and you wish yourself away, it sounds so good to hear you say it. See, it isn't eight yet. Can you put up with me until nine?"

"Until nearly nine. Annie, I wish I didn't have to go, and that's the truth of God."

Her eyes leapt into his, and their hands found each other.

It was darkening under the trees when, after a while, she spoke of Reed. "Tell me about Reed," she whispered.

"There isn't much to tell, Annie. My sister's boy; both parents dead; he has been mine since infancy. He calls me Daddy X, which means that I am not really his daddy, but just supposed to be."

"Yes," she breathed. "What a funny name! Like algebra, and a bit of mystery about it. Quite appropriately, for you are mysterious—both of you. And his name, Reed. That's unusual, spelled with two e's. Did you give him that?"

"It was a whim—a sort of whim, I suppose. In the hospital where my sister—died—there was a verse in a little frame; just one, the only relief on the bare walls of the room;—I wonder why hospitals must

have their walls so gloomy?—'A bruiséd reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench.' That was it, and it seemed, some way, to fit her case, so I called him Reed."

"It's a nice name. I like it," she said.

They were silent for some moments. Then, "What do you suppose it means, Cal?" she asked.

Cal found himself caught in an embarrassment not easy to explain. Although he had his own fairly definite views on religion he was not given to a discussion of them. He found an absurd difficulty in talking frankly with Annie Frawdic on such a subject.

"I suppose it's poetic," he ventured. "A picture of the tenderness of God. Sometimes—I wonder."

"So do I," she said, quickly. "Life isn't all tenderness, is it, Cal? A good bit of the other thing. Has been for me, anyway." She dropped her voice confidentially. "You know, Cal, I have counted myself something like that—'a bruiséd reed,' you know, bruised, but not broken. I will not let myself be broken."

He had no answer, and they sat on in silence, gently swinging in the lattice of dimming light which sifted through the leaves about them.

"At any rate, I'd rather be the bruiséd reed than the smoking flax," she continued, after a time.

"I never understood that part of it," he said.

"Then you have never used a flax taper, I guess. We don't, now-a-days, with our oil lamps or electric light. The smell—you'd understand. It isn't pleasant. The desire to quench it is very human and natural. You know, Cal, that figure seems to me more striking than the other. It's easy enough to have sympathy with the bruiséd reed, but it's different with the smoking flax. Something—somebody—who just makes

himself an outrageous nuisance in the world. To spare such a thing in the hope that, for all its offensiveness, it may some day burst into redeeming flame—that takes faith as well as sympathy."

"Is that what it means, Annie?"

"Yes. . . . Don't ask me how I know. Reed told me about his verse, as he called it, and I looked it up in a commentary. You see how interested I have been in him—and you."

But Cal was on his feet. "It's a new light, Annie," he was saying. "I never knew what it meant. I've been in the stench of it. Horrible—I wonder—"

A tremendous thought had gripped him, and his ribs seemed tightening about his heart. He had not been too weak for sympathy, for forgiveness, to "the bruiséd reed"; could he deny the same sympathy and forgiveness to "the smoking flax"? The one had been slender, touching, appealing; the other vile, nauseous, disgusting; but they were linked together in this verse of tenderness which he and Reed had made peculiarly their own. After all, was this the way out? Was it?

The voice of Reed, playing with Jimmie Ernton, chimed over the lilac hedge that screened them from the farm buildings. Annie, more sweet, more companionable than he had ever known her, draped in the vague artistry of the gathering twilight, swung gently in her hammock, her toe stirring and restirring the scattered leaves at the lowest segment of her arc. The air was as still as though it had been glass cast in a mighty mould; overhead the sunset was splashing vagrant whiffs of cloud with crimson and copper; already the colors of the east were fading into the drab death of another day. It was a time to be at peace with the world.

Cal looked at his watch; a quarter to nine. By

leaving at once he could barely make the beach by the appointed hour. And he had no desire to leave at once. What of Jackson Stake? Smoking flax! Offensive, but surely not a factor in life. Let him go. There *was* another way out. A self-renouncement, a price to pay, but a way out. He would pay it. Even as he made the resolve he suddenly knew that he was sane again.

"Must you go?" she was asking. "I suppose it is nearly nine o'clock. Couldn't you cancel it, Cal, for to-night?"

"I have cancelled it," he said, with sudden decision. . . . "How about Reed?"

"I think the boys are planning a camp fire to celebrate the closing of school. That is how they love me. Tell him you're here; they'll be glad of the chance to wait up until you go."

"But your friends?"

"They may be late, I said."

The light had gone out of the sky save for a faint curtain of lemon that still flushed the horizon north and west, and it was black darkness amid the maples when Cal at length sought Reed at the fire. Approaching quietly from the rear he paused to hear a version of one of his own stories—the story of the cloud and the shadow—as Reed regaled it into the appreciative ear of Jimmie Ernton. Time had ceased to be a factor in their young lives; they were well embarked on the shadowy sea of Romance, and even in the exultance of his new grip upon fundamentals, Cal hesitated to interrupt.

". . . And then the strangest thing happened. When the cloud was gone the shadow was gone, too; both of 'em gone together. Daddy X says that's the way

of it in life. It's about jealousy, I think, whatever that is."

"It's very strange," said Master Jim, stretching his sun-browned legs toward the fire. . . .

On the way home Cal uncovered to Reed somewhat of his new resolve. "Things have happened," he said, "which make it necessary for us to leave Mr. Stake's farm, and the Plainville district, at once. Are you game?"

"Sure—with you, and Antelope. Where are we going?"

"I don't know. Just going. And we're to start right away; to-night."

"But they'll be in bed. Ain't you—aren't you—going to say good-bye?"

"No; we're going out silently, like an army breaking camp and not letting the enemy know."

"Are we in retreat, Daddy X?"

"No—advance. The greatest advance we have yet made."

"All right. But I thought you'd want to say good-bye to Minnie. . . . I'd like to say good-bye to Grandma."

"In war-time we can't always do these things, Reed."

"Yep. I know. But the knight always says good-bye to his lady, doesn't he, Daddy X? And she gives him a token—"

"Not always, Reed. Well, here we are. Quietly, Antelope; mustn't wake the guard."

"That means Trixie, I guess," Reed suggested.

They were swinging up Beach Boulevard; the sign-board, "Beech Bullevard—Speed limit 10 miles," caught their headlights for a moment. In front of the granary they stopped and quickly loaded their few effects into the back of the car. Then, by the light of

a lamp Mrs. Stake had supplied for his room, Cal made a hurried calculation, arriving at the amount of his wages which had been overpaid. He put the sum in bank notes in an envelope, addressed it to Jackson Stake, senior, and secured it under the lamp.

"All ready, Reed," he said, quietly. "Climb in."

With all lights out the buildings and familiar objects of the farmyard bulked vague and shadowy in the general gloom. The sighing of the cows in the corral; the shifting of a horse in the stable; these were the only sounds that stirred under the tranquil stars. In his mind, rather than by sight, Cal defined the regular order of the farmyard, so changed since his arrival there less than two months before. It had been his whim, his hobby. Well, he had left his mark. They had been exhibits—A, B, C. He had used them, mixed them, noted their reactions, until almost he had exploded the lot. They were exhibits—let it go at that.

He tried to tell himself that Minnie Stake had been an exhibit, but the lie would not down. It stuck in his throat, swelling, choking him. Minnie. . . . Minnie. . . That was the price. That the smoking flax might still smoke on, filling the air with its stench and its pollution. That was the price. Well, he had resolved. . . .

He started Antelope as quietly as her clattering motor would permit, and, without lights, felt his way gently out of the yard and into the life that lies beyond renunciation.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE week for Minnie Stake had been both long and short; long in its absence from Cal, short in the rare intoxication which sped the feet of every hour. Mr. Bradshaw had been apologetic for requiring her to work on Sunday. "Very sorry, Miss Stake," he had said. "Quite unusual circumstances—"

"I wish you wouldn't call me Miss Stake," she protested. "Sounds too—too appropriate."

"I'm sorry, Miss—Stake. But really, it's not my fault. If you don't like your name——" he raised his shoulders expressively.

"I've been thinking of that," she blurted out. She was happy enough to have told Old Brad the whole story. Or at least the essential parts. But she pulled herself together.

"Subsection D of Section Four of the same Chapter provides—" The keys of her typewriter clattered on under the ripple and dance of her wonderful fingers. Mr. Bradshaw himself declared, in romantic moments, that Minnie's typewriter did not clatter; it sang, it hummed, it poured like tinkling water, it splashed like Niagara, it crashed like broadsides of rifle fire in answer to the moods of Minnie as she tripped her fantasias or banged upon it in double forte diapason. Mr. Bradshaw, when the world did well with him, and there was little doubt that his clients, winning or losing, would be able to pay his fee, sometimes would lean back in his chair and listen with serene joy to the metallic hail with which Minnie's typewriter poured its

message upon the embossed stationery of Bradshaw & Tonnerfeldt. It was a sound the pure artistry of which gladdened his heart. Moreover, were not the charges based on so much per folio?

"Now, for me, a typewriter is simply a hunt-and-peck machine," he would say on occasion to an office caller. "But for Miss Stake—why, she just plays on it. I sometimes feel I ought to charge her for it. I've seen girls—had 'em, too—who used their lily white hands more for patting their store hair than for romping up and down the alphabet. What I'm afraid of is that some gazabo—some bank clerk or farm hand or something— 'll ramble her off to the altar some day, and put the law business of Brad & Tonner on the blink. By George, if it comes to that I'll apply for a writ of *habeas corpus* or *ipso facto* or whatever may be necessary to divert a catastrophe. And I'd be doing the young rooster a service; saving him from his miss-stake, so to speak."

To-day Mr. Bradshaw was too much engrossed with the business in hand to indulge any lengthy play of banter. He walked about his little office, dictating fragments of memoranda, and insistently lighting and relighting his pipe, which as insistently went out between matches. As Minnie's fingers rippled over the keys and the white sheets flowed through her typewriter he blessed his stars for the one jewel above price in any office—a competent stenographer. At noon he had lunch sent up from No Sing's; at mid-afternoon he had tea; at seven he had supper. He seemed almost to stand guard over Minnie lest a "bank clerk or farm hand or something" should snatch her from him. The long Sunday was at an end and the light in the law office glowed brazenly and alone amid the dark windows of the block before the brief was completed and

all the documents neatly filed in Mr. Bradshaw's despatch bag.

"Thank you, Miss Stake," he said, as he buckled the straps. "Don't know what I should have done without you. You can have two days off or two days' extra pay, whichever you prefer. There won't be much doing until I'm back, anyway."

As Minnie walked to her boarding house, too tired almost to sense the romance in the gathering dusk, she wondered whether she would take two days' leave or the extra pay. The leave would give her an opportunity to go back to the farm; evenings with Cal, and escape from the intolerable Mr. Tonnerfeldt, junior partner in the firm of Bradshaw & Tonnerfeldt, insufferable on account of his "freshness" toward her, and doubly insufferable in contrast with the genial and bantering Mr. Bradshaw. On the other hand was two days' pay, and she found herself in the grip of a sudden and growing appreciation of the value of dollars. The economic side of the business of marrying was already beginning to intrude itself. Not that Cal had actually asked her, but their love was acknowledged; marriage must follow as a matter of course. They would need all their dollars, she and Cal. . . .

In the shadow of Mrs. Goode's boarding house she almost collided with Archie Hale turning from the door.

"Oh, it's you, Minnie," he said, when they recognized each other. "They told me you hadn't come back from the farm."

"I was at the office all day, Archie. Some special work for Mr. Bradshaw."

"All day Sunday! The slave driver! I've a mind to have him up for breach of the Lord's Day Act. Then he'd have a slippery client, wouldn't he?"

"It couldn't be helped, Archie," she said, wearily. She was feeling out a line of defence. "But I'm about all in. I don't think I can see you to-night."

"A run in the car is just what you need; fresh air after being shut up all day in that dingy hole. Wonder old Bradshaw wouldn't rent a decent office. But it will soon be over, Minnie. I've great news; just spoiling to tell it. Won't you come?"

"I'd like to, Archie, but— Don't you see, it isn't quite fair?"

"How 'quite fair?' No, I don't see it at all. Come along."

He took her arm and they swung around in the deep twilight thrown by the screened veranda. "Come along!"

"No, I can't," she protested. "Archie, I don't want to make it any harder than I must, but I can't go with you—any more."

He dropped her arm. Even in the darkness she could see his face harden and whiten.

"Not any more? Why?"

"We've been good friends, Archie, and I'd like to keep on being good friends, but—I know what you want, and I can't give it to you, ever. . . . Please don't misjudge me. I've told you as soon as I knew."

He was silent, and she murmured again. "Please don't misjudge me, Archie. I like you, awfully, really, but not that way. I didn't know—the difference—myself, until just lately."

His hand had sought the railing of the veranda, and when he spoke it was not with the voice of Archie Hale, but of some one strange and far away.

"Is it Cal Beach?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. . . . "Oh, Archie, I'm so sorry."

"I congratulate him," she heard the strange voice say. Then it continued, "I just called to mention that I have been appointed manager of one of the Saskatchewan branches of our bank. I—I used to think you would be interested."

He paused a moment, then turned quickly away, and before she realized what had happened he had passed through the gate and disappeared down the street. Sobered and on the verge of tears she sought her room. She was genuinely sorry for Archie and her sorrow was not eased by a sense that she had been rather less than fair to him. She had known that it was Cal Beach—that it must be Cal Beach—for ever so long, but she had used Archie to soothe her pride against the pangs of Cal's suspected flirtations with Annie Frawdic. That hadn't been quite fair, and she took herself sharply to task for it, but after half an hour's introspection she concluded that it couldn't be helped, and it might have been much worse. Archie would presently forget her altogether, or think of her only as a pleasant incident, and marry some other girl better suited to be his wife. The idea was not so comforting as she had hoped to find it.

"At any rate I've got Cal—my Cal," she breathed, and in the joy of her possession she fell asleep.

She was awakened by the June sun pouring through the eastern window of her little room. Her alarm clock still allowed her fifteen minutes, minutes which she nursed and clung to in blissful, lazy, idealizing contemplation. With her bare round arms upstretched she linked her fingers until the light shone pink in their delicate intersections; then she drew them down upon her eyes and lay dreaming in an ecstasy of tenderness. Cal—they were Cal's hands that closed her eyes. . . . The pulse of young life beat strong within her,

and the world was so good—so good! She forgave it all its buffetings; she forgave it Mrs. Goode's boarding house; she forgave it the drudgery of the farm; with a smile she forgave it Annie Frawdic; she even almost forgave it the insufferable Mr. Tonnerfeldt.

As she dressed she studied herself in the one uncertain mirror her furniture afforded. She caught the round of her face, the curve of her arm, the gentle contours of her neck, the warm glint of her new-bronze hair, the grace of her firm, strong, supple body. They were charms, she supposed; charms which man appraises with an instinctive eye. They accounted for the glances—the not wholly unwelcome glances—of admiration which she sometimes surprised in the office, on the street, in Sempter & Burton's store. But they failed to explain so amazing a phenomenon as that Cal Beach should fall in love with her. That she should love Cal was understandable enough, but that Cal should love her—that was the thing that baffled her reason. Now, Archie Hale—she could understand that. But Cal Beach— It was too wonderful for explanation.

During the absence of Mr. Bradshaw she made the best of the situation in the office, establishing a strictly business attitude toward Mr. Tonnerfeldt, and maintaining it in the face of his elaborate attentions. She wished she might have talked with Cal over the telephone, but she knew how deadly are the ramifications of the rural party line system. When, on Tuesday, she called her mother, she could hear the surreptitious lifting of receivers, and she chose her words accordingly. Everybody well? Yes. What was she doing? Preserves. What was Dad doing? Nothing, likely. What were the men doing? Gander, she didn't know; likely helping Dad. Cal was summer-fallowing— She

broke off the conversation at that word. It was sufficient to have heard Cal's name.

She wished she might have gone out to the farm for an evening, but there was no opportunity. A wild thought that she should ask Archie Hale to drive her darted into her mind, and, finding the changed conditions there, darted out again as suddenly.

Wednesday evening Archie called again. He said he felt he had acted rudely the other night and he didn't want her to think of him that way. She said she didn't think of him that way—never had. It was she who had been rude; she had not congratulated him on his promotion, nor asked him anything about it. She was really very interested, she told him. Archie said of course he was glad, but it didn't amount to much after all, now that the bottom had fallen out of everything. She assured him that it hadn't really; he just felt that way, but he'd soon get over it and marry some much nicer girl—

"Would you soon get over it," he demanded, "if Cal Beach were to pass you up?"

She whitened at the thought, and felt her ribs gripping about her heart.

"But Cal wouldn't—he wouldn't do that," she whispered. "Oh, Archie, I'm sorry." . . . When he left she would have paid him the tribute of a final kiss, but he exacted no such honor.

It was Saturday when Gander, dusty and flurried, burst into the office. Minnie was taking dictation from Mr. Bradshaw when, raising her eyes, she saw Gander in the door.

"Why Gander, what's wrong?" she cried, disregarding the voice engaged in threatening suit unless this long over-due account, in connection with which our client—

"Maybe nothin'," said Gander, with a sheepish laugh to cover his agitation. "Maybe a good deal. Can I talk to you a minute, Minn?"

"Take your brother into my private office, Miss Stake," Mr. Bradshaw suggested. "This can wait."

She led Gander into the little box which Mr. Bradshaw designated his private office. Closing the door she turned to her brother, a sudden, undefined fear trembling through her limbs. "What is it, Gander? What's wrong?"

"Where's Cal?"

"I don't know. Where is he? Has anything happened?" Her hand was on the knob of the door. She was trembling so she steadied herself against it.

"Somethin's happened, sure enough, but not jus' what I figgered. You ain't seen Cal?"

"Not since Saturday—Sunday morning, when I left the farm. Gander, tell me!"

"Well, he's gone. Him an' Reed an' their old boat of a car. Las' night, some time. Didn' know, none of us, till th' smorning. When he didn' turn out to tend his horses I thought maybe he was sick, so I went over to the granary. It was skinned out—ever'thin' gone. Old car gone; hadn't missed it till then."

With contracting heart the girl listened to her brother's words. At first the sense of them numbed her, as the shock of a wound momentarily paralyzes the feeling of pain, but as Gander's recital continued a consciousness of what it meant began to burn home upon her. She waited a moment to speak, gripping herself.

"Oh, Gander, it can't be! Surely—he must have gone only on some little trip; he'll be back by night; perhaps he's back now. He wouldn't go—he couldn't go—altogether—without leaving a word!"

"I reckon he's gone," said Gander, doggedly. "He'd

made a bit of a table— You was never in his room, Minnie?"

"N-no—no, Gander."

"Well, he'd built a little table, nailed to the wall, an' o' course it was still there, an' a lamp on it Mother had lent him. Well, under the lamp was an envelope. It was sealed an' addressed to Dad, an' I figgered here was news."

"Yes—what did it say?"

"Nothin'—not a word. Jus' some money in it. Seems Dad had overpaid him on wages, an' he left the diff'rence. Straight, so far as that goes. But it shows he don' figger on comin' back."

She let herself down into a chair and sat staring at the rows of books across the room. There was a vacancy in one of the rows; a book which Mr. Bradshaw had taken to Winnipeg. She wondered if he had forgotten to bring it back—

"I reckon this hits you pretty hard," said Gander, with a clumsy attempt at being sympathetic, and she was back among realities.

"Pretty hard, Gander," she murmured. "Pretty hard. . . . There's a reason—I know that. I'll never believe anything else until I know the reason."

"I always liked Cal," Gander conceded. "He was a queer guy, but decent, an' I reckoned how the land was beginnin' to lie between you an' him. That was why I didn' phone you. Might be all jus' a mistake, an' the less said the better."

"Oh, I'm sure it is—it must be—a mistake."

"Besides, I didn' know—I was a bit afraid, Minn, that you an' him had run off together. I'm sorry, Minn, but that's what I thought—"

"Gander!"

"An I didn' want nothin' said about it if it could be

helped. We've always been decent, Minn, an' I didn' want nothing'—"

"I understand, Gander." Her voice was suddenly calm. "We're decent still. The family honor has not been compromised."

Came a tap on the door. "Miss Stake wanted on the telephone," said Mr. Bradshaw.

"That will be news," she whispered to Gander as she hurried to her desk.

It was Jackson. Was Gander there? Yes. Any news? Not yet. Well, here was news. Annie Frolic has disappeared, too.

"What! I don't believe—"

"Yes. Last night, through the night. Went away in an auto—"

"I don't believe—"

"Told Erntons she was staying up for friends who were to call with an auto. An' Cal was there last night, sitting with her in a hammock, after dark—"

"I don't believe—"

She could hear the lifting of receivers on the party line; she could almost hear the salacious lip-licking of the delighted eavesdroppers. The world spun; the telephone swam away into distance, then smashed against her head.

"I don't believe—"

"Water!" shouted Mr. Bradshaw. "Water! Damn it, Tonnerfeldt, can't you see the girl's fainted?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

CAL and Reed, feeling their way in the darkness, wound through the poplar bluffs that sheltered the Stake homestead from the winter nor'westers. Once out of possible sight from the house Cal switched on his lights, and they quickened their speed. On to the main road, down the valley hills and across the bridge, they took their course along the route over which they had come that bright May morning so many eons ago.

"Are we going back to the city, Daddy X?" said Reed. He had drawn a blanket up about him, as though the summer night were cold, and his teeth chattered with an uncanny nervousness. Something about Daddy X was so strange; so—so terrible.

"No, we're not going back to the city; not at present. Farther west."

Sure enough, at the forks at the foot of the hill Cal took the turn to the west. There was a bad culvert, and the car lurched dangerously over it.

"All right, Antelope, old girl. All right—all right. Don't fail us now; we need you now, more than we ever did. Steady! That's better. Now for the hill."

Muffled in his blanket, the sound of Cal's voice came to Reed in a reassuring drone. He watched the green grass flowing by the car; the occasional stone, white for a moment in the wavering headlight, then suddenly gulped into blackness; the big, steady, friendly stars overhead. He heard the rumbling of the motor, the patter of the exhaust, the soft sluff of the wheels in the black earth of the road. Presently all sounds

seemed to join in a sort of lullaby: Farther west . . . farther west . . . farther west. . . .

When he awoke they were stopped by a stream, and Cal was bending over a fragment of fire, tending something with a very appetizing smell. The boy stretched his cramped limbs and came down, investigating.

"Wild duck for breakfast, Reed, old scout," said Cal, in a voice that resolutely strove for cheerfulness. "We'll have to take it straight—not even salt. That's what comes of hitting the trail in such a hurry."

Cal had shot a drake in the early morning—no difficult feat, as the feathered folk were tame in the fancied security of the law. Splitting the little body in two he had broiled it over a fire. One half of it he now tendered to Reed. The boy ate it eagerly, leaving nothing but the bones.

"Are we staying here, Daddy X?" he asked.

"No. We have still a long way to go."

They pushed on at once and travelled all that day. Several times the cupolas of grain elevators in the prairie towns loomed on the horizon, and Reed expected they would take the main road in that direction, but always Cal swung off, following some side trail, and avoiding the principal arteries of travel. He was able to obtain gasoline and food from a farmer, and so he pressed on until darkness was again upon them. Then they found a stream and camped beside it.

"Better go to bed, Reed," said Cal. "You must be tired. I want to smoke—and to think."

But Reed hesitated.

"Anything wrong, old man?" Cal inquired.

"No, Daddy X. But—couldn't we have a bed-time story, to-night?"

"I'm afraid I don't know a bed-time story to-night. I want to think."

"You've been thinking all day. You've hardly spoken—"

The little voice went lumpy with loneliness, and the brave little lips had a strange tremble to them. Cal extended his arms and the boy nestled to his breast.

"All right, old scout. First things first. Let me see—

"Once there was a clean little tree, that was so proud of being clean and straight. It stood by the side of a stream, and all day long it would watch its reflection in the water, and think what a beautiful straight young tree it was. It was a birch tree, I think, with smooth white bark and clean limbs.

"Nearby grew a twisted willow, and the willow was very jealous of its straight, clean neighbour. 'The birch puts on great airs,' said the willow, 'but wait! Some day—some day.'

"Then came a man with a sharp axe, looking carefully at all the trees and bushes. His eye fell on the birch, and as it was very beautiful he marked it for his victim. That is often the way, Reed; it was the deformities of the twisted willow that saved it from destruction; but you cannot understand. 'Whack, whack!' went the sharp axe, and the beautiful birch reeled and fell into the sympathetic arms of a great poplar, that had known her since she was a tiny shoot.

"Then the man cut off her upper limbs, and trimmed her all about, and fondled her smooth white skin with his hands. Although he had destroyed her he seemed, in a way, to be very fond of her.

"And then he went down to the stream that flowed close by the feet of the twisted willow. The birch had often watched her beautiful reflection in that clear

stream, but she never had been able to feel its cool waters about her. And now the man thrust her into the stream, so that the water came up about her waist.

"And then a strange thing happened. At the very point where the beautiful birch met the water its straight lines were suddenly twisted, so that it was straight no longer, but crooked. And the twisted willow, looking on, cried to its neighbours, 'I told you! I told you! Look at the beautiful birch now. I always said she was a sham. Look at her now!'

"And the beautiful birch herself could not understand it at all, but she wept that she who had been so straight could be so crooked.

"But presently the man came back for her, and drew her up out of the water, and as soon as she was back in her own element she was straight again. But she had heard what the willow had said, and now she answered, gently but reprovingly, 'Willow, I am glad for what had befallen me, because now I know that we are all what God has made us, and not what we have made ourselves.' "

"What does it mean, Daddy X?" said the boy, when he was sure the story ended.

"I don't know, Reed. I wish I did."

By the third day of their travel Cal judged that they were far enough from Plainville to escape comment. Of pursuit he had no fear, but he wanted to bury himself in a new community. They were now well across the border into Saskatchewan, still avoiding the towns and the principal roads, and making their way along the back trails that linked the various settlements together.

"Have to go to work again pretty soon," he confessed. "The treasury is getting low."

"So is the tank," said Reed, as the motor gave a warning sputter. "Let us make for that shack."

They were on the brow of a hill, and in the valley below lay a settler's shack, with fields of wheat and oats stretching down to a stream that glistened white in the distance. By dint of gravity and much persuasion Cal was able to coax Antelope almost to the shanty door.

The door stood open, but there was no sign of anyone about.

"Well, let's explore," said Cal, and, going inside, they found a single room, about twelve by fourteen feet in size, framed with bare two-by-four studding and covered by a low, shingled roof. A rusty stove, a table, a chair, a packing-box cupboard nailed against the wall, a trunk, a gramophone, a home-made bed dishevelled in one corner—these were the items of furniture. As it was nearing noon they made themselves at home, digging early potatoes in the little garden behind the shack, discovering bacon and butter in the pail hanging down the well, starting a fire in the rusty stove. In a few minutes a pleasant sizzle was coming from the frying pan and an appetizing odor filled the room.

"Won't he mind?" Reed asked with some misgivings as Cal explored the cupboard for dishes and further resources in food.

"Not likely. Hospitality with a Westerner is not a social function; it has to do with the heart; he really means it. So you see you're as welcome to a meal in his house in his absence as in his presence. You may not understand all that—"

"Of course he does," said a hearty voice, and a man of about Cal's age stood framed in the door.

"Welcome? I should say so! And the meal cooked to the bargain! How's the foraging?"

"Not so bad for a new cook," Cal answered. "Potatoes, bacon, bread and butter, and a pail of jam. I was figuring on setting for three."

"Three is right," said the farmer, including Reed in his glance. "If you can find enough dishes. If not, we can eat in relays. I'll be in as soon as I unhitch. Saw the smoke and wondered what was doing."

He disappeared as suddenly as he had come, but a few minutes later they heard him splashing in the basin at the front of the shack. Cal had supplemented the farmer's dishes from the camp equipment carried in the old Ford, and had set for three. He had moved the table over beside the trunk, that Reed might use it for a chair, and had found a box on which he himself could sit, and when the settler came in from his ablutions, the meal was ready.

"This is something like it," said the farmer, surveying the arrangements with approval. "Beastly business getting one's own meals. My name's Mason—Fred Mason—and I'm the owner of this here country estate except for certain prior claims by the original vendors and the holders of the second mortgages. Yours?"

Cal introduced Reed and himself.

"I see an Ontario license plate on that old dust hound of yours," Mr. Mason resumed. "Going far?"

"Not much farther," said Cal. "We're short of two essentials—cash and gasoline."

"That makes the going a bit heavy," the farmer reflected over a well-heaped fork of potatoes and bacon. "What do you do when you're at home?"

"Been farming all summer."

Suddenly a thought struck Mr. Mason so hard the fork dropped from his upraised hand.

"Say, maybe you're just the fellow I'm looking for!" he exclaimed. "I've word to go home. Old folks not so young as they used to be and a bit under the weather, but I'm tied up here with the stock. I'd be back by harvest, and if you could just stick around and maybe finish the ploughing and put up a bit of hay—"

They were not long in striking a bargain, and it was typical of Mr. Mason that remuneration was the last thing he discussed. Indeed, he seemed to have overlooked that detail altogether.

Cal brought it up. "What are you paying?" he inquired.

"Oh, I dunno. What's she worth?"

"I was getting forty at my last place."

"Pretty good. But I dunno. Tell you what, I'm not very flush with cash, especially if I go East, but I can fix you up a credit at the store for anything you need, and if you stay on until the crop is threshed I'll make it right with you."

They shook hands on that, and Mason, elated with the sudden prospect of a visit back home, promptly rolled all the responsibilities of the farm into Cal's lap, as it were. He enumerated the horses, the "horned stock," the pigs and the hens; explained about the ploughing and the hay; cautioned Cal about fire, and to boil the water, as the well was fed by surface drainage and there had been fever going around. After dispatching Cal on horseback to the nearest neighbour, Peterson, a Swede, to borrow a gallon of gasoline, and detailing Reed to wash the dishes, now the center of a busy colony of flies, Mason engaged in an earnest but unsuccessful search for a clean shirt in which to travel.

"Never mind, we'll buy a new shirt in town," he announced to the boy, cheerily, when the forlorn hope

in the bottom of his trunk revealed a body with both arms missing. "I remember now. I cut those off last fall to line the sleeves of my smock when the weather got cold. But there's more at the store, which is only twelve miles away, and I'll bet that old go-humper of yours can make it in about a week."

"Humph!" Reed exploded. "You should see Antelope go when she gets her wind up. I bet we traveled a million miles coming here."

"Well, it was worth it," Mr. Mason remarked, with a quizzical grin. "To me, anyway. Haven't had a boy on this place since it was born. We'll sample the ice cream cones in Wheatview to-night, eh, old scout?"

Reed was beginning to like this acquaintance. "That is what Daddy X sometimes calls me," he said.

"Daddy X? That's a funny one. Who is he? Your dad?"

"No; just my Daddy X. My real father was killed in the war."

The big, wind-tanned face of the farmer softened, and his voice dropped to a still friendlier note. "Sorry, old chap," he said, combing his fingers through Reed's hair. "I lost a brother over there, too, so we can be sort of pals, can't we?"

That night they drove to Wheatview together. Wheatview turned out to be as like Plainville as one pea to another, except newer and barer. There was the same single, busy street, lined with Fords and other more pretentious carry-alls; the same row of shop fronts under two-story buildings, culminating in a three-story hotel; the same—they might have been the same—hardware store and implement shed and poolroom and Chinese restaurant; the same vacant lots littered with packing-boxes, barrels, and farm machinery. Mason introduced Cal to the managers of one

or two of the stores, establishing for him a line of credit until "after threshing;" then, on the same convenient terms, he bought for himself a traveling outfit, from new shoes of the latest cut to a hat to match. In the barber's shop he underwent a scouring and scraping, while Reed, his eyes filled with unwonted scenes, took in the splendor of the barber's mirrors and the mysterious colored liquids in the funny-shaped bottles. When tonsorial skill could do no more Mason took shelter with his bundles in a little room at the back of the shop, from which he presently emerged in the glory of his new clothes, very unlike the ruddy farmer of a few hours before. In an ice cream "emporium" nearby he filled Reed to the danger point with all sorts of concoctions, bought cigars for himself and Cal, and gave final instructions concerning the management of the farm.

They saw their new employer off on the night train, discovered Antelope among a swarm of her younger relatives, and retraced their way to the Mason farm. The course lay southeasterly; behind them glowed the lingering luminosity of the midsummer night; overhead were clear, friendly stars. In the air was the scent of prairie roses mingled with the first faint perfumes of the early wheat. Now and again the headlights of an approaching automobile blazed along their path; now and again the shadow of a farmsteading, wrapped in slumber, loomed up sudden and vague through the gathering darkness. Presently Reed, from much feasting, fell asleep, and Cal was left alone with his thoughts.

"I did the only thing I could," he confided to Antelope. "I know now that for days I was sheer, stark mad. I know now—I have occasion to know—how easily one can get on the wrong track; how thin, after

all, is the partition between good and evil, and how good the evil may sometimes appear. If it hadn't been for Annie Frawdic— I suppose our jails are full of people not much worse—not any worse—than I. I must write an article on that when I get settled down —when I get settled down."

He ended in a bitter laugh. For an instant a vision of a simple cabin by the shore of a lake, with a typewriter under the trees and Minnie Stake singing from somewhere in the house, framed itself like a picture in the eye of his imagination; the next, it was gone, and the black road rolled up incessantly under the rumbling wheels. This was the price; the dethroning of that vision, casting it down and out even from the inmost chambers of his dreams; this was the price he had bargained with himself to pay that the sleeping boy at his side might grow up unashamed. Yet to Minnie his thoughts would turn as steel to an irresistible magnet. He wondered how she had received the news of his flight, and what interpretation she had put upon it. He wondered how long it would be until she would find solace in the attentions of Archie Hale. He loved Minnie Stake, but he had, or thought he had, no illusions about her. Minnie was a practical girl. She would take her blow standing, smother her grief and her furious wonder within herself, and make the best of the situation. Just as he was doing.

He reflected then, and often in the days immediately to come, that Fortune is a capricious, but not unfriendly, mistress. She had threatened his health that she might show him the land of the open trail, and his life had grown abundantly. She had introduced him to love and hate, that he might know how tremendous were their sorrows. She had robbed him of his home, turned him into the wilds a fugitive, and

promptly sheltered him again under the roof of the genial Mason. She had torn from him his sister in agony, and given him a son who was more than many sisters.

"Yes," he admitted, "I have lost much, but I have gained more. I have paid for Reed, but Reed is worth the price."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LIFE on the Mason farm moved along pleasantly enough. It was very different from Jackson Stake's; here Cal and Reed seemed alone in the world. From their shack in the valley no other habitation could be seen; even the rambling buildings of Peterson, their nearest neighbor, were cut from view by a shoulder of the hills. Now and again a settler's wagon creaked its slow course along the trail that led to Wheatview; occasionally an automobile sped by, trailing a cloud of dust; but neither settler nor motorist gave more than a glance to the Mason shack, nor so much as a thought to its occupants. The nearest telephone was miles away, and the nearest school still farther.

It was twelve miles to Wheatview, but the railway passed not far from the Mason farm, and Reed soon discovered that by climbing the bank of the valley he could command a view of the freight trains, crawling like gigantic serpents, until they faded out of view in the heat-haze of the plains. Many of the freight trains stopped at a siding and a water tank about four miles away, and, from his point of observation, the boy began to pick up an acquaintance with them. He soon learned, too, the hours at which passenger trains might be expected, and as he watched them rushing by, trailing behind their pennants of steam and smoke, he felt that this was a very interesting world indeed. Some day he would be an engineer, and one of those monsters would answer to his hand!

The absence of all other companionship threw Cal and Reed more closely together than ever. Cal put the boy to useful work, trapping gophers in the fields; washing dishes, sweeping, and cleaning in the house; helping with the feeding of horses and the care of livestock and poultry. Reed contributed with his own fork in the hay field, hoisting little tufts of the new-mown grass on to the waiting wagon, and even drove a dubious sorrel on the hayrake for short periods under Cal's attentive eye. They had found a pond where the water was suitable for swimming, and in the evenings of the hot summer days they would splash together in its liquid freshness. Already Cal was beginning to put into effect his orderly practices, tidying the yard and buildings, ranging the machinery in regimental array, mowing the long weeds that grew behind the barn. Had there been anyone to note he might have seen a soul had moved into the body of the Mason farm.

With all these occupations Cal sought to keep his mind engaged, tried to maintain the high spirit of his self-abnegation. He assured himself he was doing the only thing possible, and that he was very happy with a virtuous sense of unselfishness. It was a case of directing his energies aright—the basic thing in the development of a civilized society. He would be true, at least, to his own theories. Order was the rule of life; order, and system, and growth based upon a confidence in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. What of it if, in accomplishing that triumph, the individual must be crushed, as the stones are crushed in building a highway for the traffic of the world? Progress, too, demands her highways, and builds them of any material at hand. The material may be crushed,

but progress goes on. Very well; that was his contribution.

But there were times when his philosophies deserted him, and in their desertion stripped away the veil of his artificial composure, revealing to him how utterly dejected and miserable he was. It was when alone in the fields, away from the presence of the boy, that he felt his load most unbearable. With Reed at hand the stake seemed worth the price, but with Reed away his mind would revert to that dream of a bungalow down by the lake. Then would come a tremendous desire to write to Minnie Stake—to reopen the wound which was so sorely healing. For these reasons he encouraged Reed to believe that his help in the fields was essential, called him his hired man, and clung to his company as the one thing left in life.

There were times, however, when the boy seemed listless and dull; there were days when even the prospect of driving the sorrel mare on the hayrake failed to stir his enthusiasm.

"What's the matter, old man?" Cal would ask, with a concern he tried to hide, on such occasions. "Are you lonely for someone to play with?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"Well, we must find you someone. I wish we had a dog."

"I wish we had Trixie and Big Jim."

"So do I."

"And Grandma and Jimmie Ernton and Minnie."

"So do I. . . ."

So things went on until a particularly hot afternoon in mid-July. Reed was more moodish than usual, and at length Cal sent him to the house, directing him to stay quietly in the shade until it was time to prepare supper. "You might make supper a little early," he

added, with a sudden happy thought, "and we'll drive to town to-night and see a picture show."

Reed's eyes lighted momentarily, and he trudged off toward the shack. But when Cal followed at five he found no preparations for supper. Reed was lying on the bed in the corner of the little room.

"Why, what's the matter, old scout? No supper to-night?"

"I don't feel very well," the boy answered, beginning to cry. "I've got a headache, and I'm dizzy, and I don't feel very well."

Cal felt his heart suddenly gripped in a strange and stifling clutch. Reed had always been so well. . . . Sick, under these conditions. . . . If he should lose everything now!

He moved anxiously to the side of the bed and placed his hand on the child's forehead. It was hot and dry. The pulse was rapid, the breathing quick and catchy. He raised him slightly in his arms.

"Any pains anywhere?"

"No, but I have a headache, and—I—don't feel—very well."

The voice trailed off listlessly while Cal's mind went plunging through strange crannies of memory for all he knew about treatment of fever. The first thing was to call a doctor. It was four miles to a telephone. He could be back in half an hour.

"Can you stick it out alone for half an hour, Reed, while I go to call a doctor? We'll get a doctor and have you fixed up in no time."

The boy's eyes, unnaturally bright, were fixed on the bare rafters of the roof, and he seemed to be swallowing at something in his throat. It was a minute before he answered. "All right, Daddy X," he breathed. "But don't—be—long."

Cal rushed to his car, chased by something nearer panic than he had known since childhood. If only there were a woman; Minnie, Mrs. Stake, Annie Frawdic—any woman! He cranked viciously, but got no answering chuck. He straightened up, wiped his forehead—to discover that he was perspiring profusely—and cranked again. No response. Horseback, then, and he rushed toward the stable. On his way a thought overtook him and he rushed back to the car. Sure enough, he had forgotten to put on the switch. He set it, cranked again, and Ante, well primed, started off with a roar.

The incident steadied him. "No use losing your head, Cal, boy," he soothed himself. "You need it now more than ever. Reed will be all right. But if he shouldn't—"

The thought added another notch to his throttle, although he was already tearing wildly through the valley. If he should throw a tire; if he should break a steering arm—

A tremendous bump in a fresh badger hole cautioned him, and he reduced his speed. It was only four miles to Dempman's, and the difference between a breakneck pace and a reasonable gait could not be vital. Dempman, too, was a bachelor—worse luck. There was no woman to whom he could turn.

He found Dempman's shack empty, and no one in sight, but the door was not locked. He hurried in, located the telephone, lifted the receiver, thrust it to his ear.

"Get off the line," said a woman's voice. "There's someone on the line, Carrie. Get off! The line's busy."

"Pity one couldn't have the line for a minute without someone butting in," another feminine voice added.

"Get off! How do you put up your strawberries, Isobel, pound for pound, or how? I always do mine pound for pound, but Mrs. Fordley was sayin' in Wheatview she was gettin' herself a new hat and I seen her in the store, so, of course, I went up and said how-do to her, and, my land, you know that old hat of hers? I guess she's had that ever since they homesteaded, at least as long as I remember, and we've been here six years—or is it seven?—let me see, was it six years ago last spring? You ought to know because you'se folks came the spring after us; at any rate, it was the spring we had so much rain in May and the roads were something awful! I'll never forget the night we landed. You remember Pete came out the fall before, and he was at the station to meet me, and the roads! My land, you couldn't see the axle—"

"May I have the line a moment? I want to call Wheatview?" Cal interrupted.

"Who's that fresh guy, Isobel? Someone's always buttin' in. Tell him he'll get the line when we're good an' through. Oh, my land, Isobel, did you hear about Mrs. Garton's setting of thor'bred eggs? Well, she paid four or five dollars a dozen or something like that—"

"Will you let me have the line a moment? I want to call a doctor."

"There he is again. Can you beat it, Isobel? And that old gag about callin' a doctor. That's played out years ago. 'Pon my word I haven't had a visit on this phone for I don't know how long, always somebody buttin' in. What was I talkin' about? Let me see—Oh, yes, about putting up strawberries, pound for pound, or how. Pete says I make all my jams too rich. He says if I'd show my jams at the Wheatview fair there'd be nothin' to it, but just one, two, three, but,

my land, I ain't got the nerve to go in for that kind of thing, although they do say that bein' the wife of a director has more to do with the prizes than anythin' else. Eh, what do you think? Anyway, I haven't the time— Oh, did I tell you 'bout Louise—she's our second, you know—how well she done at the summer exams? Pete says he don't know where Louise gets her brains, but I tell him I could guess—"

"Take care, Carrie! That's a hard one on you. Ha! Ha! Ha! Watch your step, Carrie!"

"Oh, my land, Isobel; what a mind you have! I never thought—"

"May I have the line a minute? It is really serious. There's a boy very sick and I want to call the doctor for him—"

"Oh, *can* that old gag! Line's busy! Get off the line!"

"I'm in dead earnest. I've got to get a doctor at once, and I'm going to stay on this line until I get him. Moreover, Carrie, I'm going to explain to your husband how it is that he doesn't understand where Louise gets her brains—"

There was a gasp and a clicking of receivers, and a minute later Cal had his connection through to Wheatview. Dr. Thompson's wife answered, as the doctor himself was out of town. She couldn't say when he'd be back. Yes, he would come out as soon as he returned. Yes, he knew the place. . . . Probably typhoid. No solid food, and if he becomes delirious, keep down the temperature by bathing, but be careful not to let him take a chill. Yes, Dr. Thompson will come at once, as soon as he returns. No, there is no other doctor in Wheatview. No, I'm afraid it's not possible to get a nurse; there are so many demands—

With this Cal had to be satisfied, and he turned the

situation over in his mind as he hurried back to Reed. It might be hours—many hours—before the doctor could come. It might be morning. His helplessness pressed home upon him; he wanted tremendously someone upon whom he could lean in this moment of trial. This was the unexpected, the bolt out of the blue sky—

He found Reed apparently asleep, and he stole gently to the bed. But a consciousness of his presence seemed to seize the lad; he stirred, and muttered something which Cal's ear did not catch.

"It's I, Reed, old boy; it's Daddy X."

"Daddy X? Where's Trixie?"

Cal was about to explain when he remembered having read somewhere that the wandering delusions of a patient in fever delirium should be humored rather than explained or contradicted.

"Trixie's outside, playing somewhere. With Big Jim, I guess."

The low sun poured through the western window and its yellow rays lit up the bed. They fell across the flushed face of the child; they limned the faint smile on his lips as he heard the assurance that Trixie was playing with Big Jim. They stirred to life the atoms of dust in their amber wedge and blazed upon the water pail in the corner of the room.

Cal brought him water, and he drank greedily, sinking back from the upraised dipper as though into a stupor of sleep.

"Where's Grandma?" he suddenly demanded. "I want Grandma."

"Perhaps she'll come pretty soon."

The boy began to sob. "I want Grandma—now."

"All right; I'll see if I can get her."

Cal turned toward the stove, and, remembering suddenly the advice from the doctor's wife, started a fire

to heat water for a bath. Reed had again fallen into quietness, as though awaiting the arrival of Mrs. Stake. Cal dipped a towel in cold water, and, bringing it with him, laid it across the child's forehead. As it happened, it covered his eyes.

"Is that you, Grandma?"

In that moment came an idea to Cal, and, with simulated voice, he answered, "Yes, dear. Are you feeling better?"

"Grandma!" he cried. "Hold me in your arms!"

A vision from somewhere in memory burst upon Cal—the scene which he had once witnessed through the window of the "room" in Jackson Stake's house. There, under the cheap crayon portraits of her ancestors, the old woman sat with this boy in her arms, her eyes closed, her hungry soul rambling with its unknown offspring through the Elysian fields. There, surely, by the light that never was on land or sea, these two had seen, and had known. . . .

Cal wrapped a blanket about the boy, and, still keeping his eyes covered, raised him from the bed. The little head fell back against his shoulder, content.

"Sing to me, Grandma," he murmured. Then, suddenly jerking himself into an upright position, "You're not Grandma! You're Daddy X!"

"Yes, I'm Daddy X. Grandma, I'm afraid, is too far away to come at present."

"She can't be far away," Reed answered, slowly, as though groping about in his mind for some illusive fact. "I saw her a minute ago."

The words sent a strange shiver up and down Cal's back. Was this—?

The kettle began to sing on the stove, and he sought refuge in action. Returning Reed to the bed, he drew his fingers about the little body and realized how irri-

tating the coarse blankets must be to the dry, burning skin. But he had no linen or cotton sheets; not even a tablecloth. Thoughts of a tablecloth suggested another substitute, and he went plundering in the battered suitcase which housed his personal effects. Presently he emerged with an unsoiled shirt of his own which he spread on the bed as a miniature sheet. Then, with hot water and a cloth—he tore a shirt sleeve loose for the purpose—he gently bathed the boy, being careful to expose only a small portion of the body at a time. The operation appeared to bring relief, for Reed lay more quietly, and for short periods seemed to fall into a sort of stupor of sleep.

So he bathed and caressed, with hot water on the body and cold water on the head, until the heat of the fever seemed somewhat abated and the skin grew moist to the touch. So he sat and tended his patient as the sunlight died in his western window; as the glow of the evening sky faded from yellow to mauve to purple; as the golden band on the horizon dimmed to steel grey under the enveloping curtains of the night. So he sat as the lingering breezes of the gloaming stole along the silent valley and whispered about the eaves and gables of the roof. So he sat, paying once more the overpaid but never satisfied price of parenthood, as the night settled down upon the endless plains and the cold stars, one by one, lighted their beacons overhead.

It was thus that Doctor Thompson found him, just as the hands of the little clock on the wall were pointed to twelve.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

QUICKLY but systematically the doctor made his examinations, while Cal, seized once more with a sense of his own impotence, stood helplessly by. A yellow pallor from the single smudgy lamp hung about the bed, and against its feeble rays the doctor's robust form flung its huge silhouette on the wall. Cal stood in silence, in the hope and fear of one held on the edge of abysmal things.

"He's running quite a temperature," said Doctor Thompson, at length. "Almost a hundred and four. Too bad we couldn't have him in a hospital, but he can't be moved at present. He's been miserable for awhile?"

"Well, he hasn't seemed quite himself," said Cal, glad for the relief which he found in even the most casual words. "Didn't seem to have any spirit—"

"Exactly. I'm afraid we have a case of typhoid on our hands, and it's rather awkward dealing with it out here. Always been a healthy boy?"

"Oh, quite. . . . Doctor, is he very sick?" The words came at last with a rush, and the doctor, for the first time since he entered the room, looked keenly into the anxious face in the semi-gloom beside him.

"Your boy?" he asked, evading an immediate answer.

"Well, yes. My sister's. I have had him since he was a baby."

"Ah! His mother is not living, then? That is

unfortunate. When a child is sick he needs his mother."

"Is he very sick, Doctor?"

"Yes, I would say he is. A typhoid patient is always sick—very sick. Still, the percentage of mortality is not so very high, where proper care is given. To be quite frank with you, that is what worries me most. If we could have a nurse— Unfortunately, the supply just now is much less than the demand. Typhoid is a disease for the nurse rather than for the doctor."

"Couldn't we get one from Winnipeg?"

"It's doubtful. You understand," and the doctor hesitated as though to choose words that would not give offense; "this is hardly a Grade A position. A nurse wouldn't thank me for bringing her out here when there are so many other calls."

Cal's eyes followed the doctor's unconscious glance around the small and sordid room, and he understood all that had been left unsaid.

"What can I do?" he exclaimed, desperately. "I will do anything—anything. Surely someone will help. Surely there is someone with heart enough—"

"It's not lack of heart," said the doctor, gently. "It's lack of experience—lack of experienced help. Look at me," and he suddenly stood up before him. He was a big man in the prime of life, but there were marks of pain and weariness about his eyes. "I haven't had my clothes off for four nights. Yet I would take him to town, to my own house, if I dared move him. I can't send my wife; she's indispensable there, and I've no one else to send."

Suddenly he was again looking keenly at Cal. "You're not Mason, are you?"

"Oh, no. Mr. Mason is in the East. I'm carrying on for him for a few weeks. My name is Beach—

Calvin Beach. And I'm sorry for what I said—about there being no heart; you understand?"

The doctor laid a hand on his arm. "That's all right, Beach, old man," he said. "I've a couple of kiddies of my own, and I know what this means to you. But I begin to see hope. You're a man of education, or I'm mistaken?"

"I'm a university man."

"Good! You'll have to take hold. You will have learned the value of exactness, and will be able to follow my instructions. You can carry on for a day or two. I'll send out bedding; sheets, you know, and everything of that kind, and you will have to be nurse until we can get help. We must have a woman—not necessarily a nurse, but a woman of sense and intelligence as soon as possible. Is there no relative—no friend of the family to whom you can appeal? In the meantime you can carry on."

The last words fell on Cal's ears unheard. His mind was away, away on a wild mission of hope. It was wild, he knew, but there was a hope in it, a gleam of hope.

"Paper!" he demanded. "Your prescription pad. Let me write a telegram!"

The doctor extended a pad and Cal scrawled on it:

Mrs. Jackson Stake, Plainville, Man. Reed is very sick and I cannot get a nurse. We are alone on a homestead, twelve miles from Wheatview. Will you come? Typhoid fever. I can explain everything. Do it for Reed—if not for me. Will you come? His life is at stake. Cal.

"Send that for me as soon as you get to town. It is my only hope."

But the doctor returned the slip to his hand. "Sup-

pose you take it to town yourself. I'll stay with the boy until you return. Besides, I may be able to steal an hour's sleep. I saw your car in the yard, or you can take mine if it's out of order."

Cal seized the doctor's hand in a quick grasp of gratitude, and a minute later he was cranking Antelope.

Minnie Stake was taking dictation from Mr. Tonnerfeldt on the absorbing topic of a chattel mortgage on four cows described as follows, that is to say, Betsy, aged seven years, brown, white patch on ribs; Rosey, five years—when the ring of the telephone bell interrupted the machinery of the law.

"Damn a telephone," said Mr. Tonnerfeldt, who was enjoying his usual bad humour. "The most impertinent of all inventions. Butts right in and ditches your train of thought. Who is it, Miss Stake?"

"It seems to be for me," she answered. "Yes, this is Miss Stake. A telegram? Yes, I'll take it. Go ahead."

The girl began making characters in shorthand, when suddenly even Mr. Tonnerfeldt, absorbed though he was in the damage which had been done to the process of the law in the case of the four cows aforesaid, took note of her agitation. Her face had gone suddenly colourless; her hands trembled; the receiver threatened to fall from her grasp.

"What's the matter, Miss Stake? Nothing wrong at home, I hope?" was the concerned inquiry of Mr. Tonnerfeldt, who, contrary to Minnie's fixed belief, had a heart tucked away somewhere in the recesses of his much-detested person. But Minnie could not answer. She was gazing through infinities of time and space at certain twisted little characters on the paper before her, and realizing with a woman's intui-

tion that she had come to the great moment of her life. For, among a sea of minor confusions, one great thought had swept over her like a tidal wave. The message was for her mother, that was clear enough, but—why not substitute? The telegraph operator, for the sake of convenience, and perhaps because of a certain romantic flavor about the sudden disappearance of Cal Beach and the salacious village gossip that had coupled it alternately with the names of Annie Frawdic and Minnie Stake, had telephoned the message to her. He would not telephone it to the farm; he would probably not even trouble to mail it; she could avoid any risk on that score by calling for it at the office. Then it would be in her hands. And if she were to substitute for her mother, who was to know? And who had a right to care?

Here was the opportunity to clear up the mystery. She did not propose to run after Cal Beach; indeed, it was a question whether she ever could forgive the outrageous treatment she had received at his hands; but she proposed to get at the facts. In any action that was the first step; get the facts. That he had gone with Annie Frawdic she had never really believed, but it was plain enough that others believed it; the half-quizzical, half-despising, sidelong glances which she sometimes encountered on the street, and which sent the color flowing into the roots of her hair, blared to her like a trumpet that her name was being bandied about by the gossip-mongers of Plainville. Cal Beach had done that. He had left her in an impossible position without a word of explanation. With a secret hope she had been the first to handle the office mail day by day after his departure, but day by day the secret hope had died down until finally it went out altogether. Whatever the cause of his strange conduct,

whatever explanation he might offer, there could be no excuse—

And now he was in trouble. She read the scrawly characters again; read them while they swam before her eyes. He was appealing to her mother. Why not to her? The girl crushed that stab of strange jealousy out of her bosom, but the sting of it remained. He was offering to explain. He said he could explain. Why, then, had he not explained? Why had he left her to be the subject of comment of those— It was too bitter to think about. Surely she had been humiliated enough. Must she humiliate herself further by flying to him; rush to him on a subterfuge, he who had left her—

Slowly, out from the mist, came one clean, triumphant fact. It was not for himself he was appealing. It was for Reed. As she read the notes again she knew that Cal Beach—the Cal Beach she had known—could never, never write that telegram on his own behalf. Not though he stood at the gates of death. *There* was humiliation for you. Suddenly she saw it clear as daylight. What was her humiliation to this? Nothing but love—his love for Reed—could have wrung that appeal from his heart.

"I'm going home!" she said, springing from her seat. "I'll have to be away for—for some time. I hope you'll manage. It's very important. Will you call a car for me, please, Mr. Tonnerfeldt? I want a car to go home."

On the road, as they tore through long lanes of summering wheat, she turned the situation over and over in her mind. Reed was sick—dangerously sick. No help could be had. Cal, frantic with his love for the boy, had swallowed his pride—whatever wild pride it had been that had led him to such inexplicable be-

haviour—and had appealed to her mother. He had remembered her mother's attachment to Reed, and had turned to her in his distress. But did he really expect her mother to leave the work of the farm—? Cal knew how inexorable were the demands of that work. With a sudden pounding of her heart she wondered whether he had really expected her mother to come, or had he deliberately opened the way for the substitution which she planned? Of course, he couldn't make such an appeal direct to her. . . . Cal was deep, deep.

She had settled her course and regained her composure by the time the car drew up at the weather-beaten house which she still called home. Her mother unbended from the mixing-board, her hands heavy with dough, as Minnie's shadow fell in at the door.

"Well, for the soul or sake o' me, Minnie, are you sick? What a start you give me! You look plumb—You ain't lost your job, Minnie?"

"No—nothing as bad as that. Where's Dad? I'm going away for awhile, and I might as well tell you both at once."

"Goin' away? My land! He's out—oh, here he comes, him an' Jackie. What's it all about?"

"I want to tell you all at once," said Minnie, addressing her father and brother, "and so save words—and time. I have a telegram from Cal; he's at Wheatview, Saskatchewan, and Reed is dangerously sick. He can't get a nurse, and he wants me to go out—and I'm going."

For a moment the old farmer stood—stock still under the impact of this news and declaration. Then, with one great hand he scuffled his thin hair as though to promote cerebral activity.

"Well, I'll be— Cal Beach, did you say? Wheatview, did you say? Well, I'll—"

Mrs. Stake had dropped into a chair, heedless of the dough that settled in her lap. "Reed—Reed sick—Reed sick," she repeated to herself, as one who would placate a thought too terrible to be accepted. "It's me he needs. If only the work wasn't so everlastin'. Reed sick! The little boy—the poor little boy." She rocked back and forth in a paroxysm of anxiety and sympathy.

"I think we've all had enough of this Beach fellow," said young Jackson. "You know what everybody's saying about Minnie. You know—"

"What are they saying about me?" demanded the girl, hotly. "What are they saying, and what do I care what they say? Out with it!"

"Well, if you must know, they're saying that Stake's hired man got out when the gettin' was good. Nice stuff, that, to hear whenever a fellow goes to Plainville."

"Oh—you—you—you—" Under the insult Minnie's face, which had been flushed, went white; her eyes no longer flashed, but contracted into a cold, murderous glow. No longer was she a docile Stake, but a furious daughter of her mother's dark blood. On the table lay a knife; long, thin, well-ground for the kitchen services. Her hand found it; closed on it; slowly, with the stalking step of a tigress, she moved toward her brother. But her father, suddenly the masterful man that he sometimes was, threw himself upon her.

"You're crazy, Minnie; you're crazy! There, girl, be still. Shut up, Jackson! You ought to be whipped like a dog! There now, girl, be still. Be still, Minnie. That's it, Minnie, be still. You're goin' to Cal if you want to, an' if anybody wants to talk he can settle with me," and he turned defiantly to his son. "You under-

stand, if anybody wants to talk about Minnie he can settle with me. I don' believe anythin' wrong about neither Minnie nor Cal, an' if anybody else believes it they can settle with me."

"Of course, I don't believe it, either," said Jackson, adroitly shifting ground. "And Minnie needn't try to take it out on me. I just said what people are sayin', which ain't very nice, you'll admit."

He was thinking fast, realizing that he had made a serious blunder. The success with which Cal had given him the slip, and the completeness with which he had disappeared, had left him baffled and beaten. It was not entirely that he had expected to blackmail his victim out of money; it was the cleverness with which he had been outwitted that rankled within him. It had been a duel between them; a duel with no seconds, no referee, no witnesses, and first blood had gone to his adversary. Now, through a whim of fate, the weapons were in his hands again, and he had been fool enough to jeopardize them by his gratuitous offense to Minnie.

"It wasn't my saying," he continued, "and I'm not hinting that I believe it, or anything like that. I'm sorry, Minn, for offending you. Where's the telegram? What does he say?"

But Minnie had disposed of the telegram by tearing it up on the road. "I haven't got it," she said; "the agent 'phoned it to me, and I haven't got it. Here are my notes," and she read them off. "You see it's serious, and there's no time to lose, as I must catch the next train."

They stood in silence for a moment, contemplating this sudden upheaval in their affairs. It was young Jackson who was first to offer a suggestion.

"The train connection to Wheatview is bad, and it

will take you a couple of days, Minn, if you have to go 'round by Winnipeg. If Dad would lend his car I would go with you, and we could drive it in less time. We could spell off at the wheel and drive day and night. Besides, he says they're alone on a homestead and—don't fly off again—it wouldn't be quite the thing for you to go by yourself. What do you say, Dad?"

"Sure! Take the car if it will save time. Minnie an' you can get your things together an I'll fill her up with oil an' gasoline. Wisht I could go myself. I might be able—"

Half an hour later they were on the road. Jackson was at the wheel and Minnie sat in silence beside him. He drove so furiously that conversation was impossible, even had she been disposed to speak, so she clung to her seat and wrestled with her thoughts. She was not enthusiastic over her brother's decision to accompany her, but she had not been able to find any argument against it. He had wounded her deeply and was, she supposed, offering this act by way of atonement. That Jackson entertained no friendly feelings toward Cal she had for some time suspected, and his outburst in the kitchen had confirmed that suspicion. Taking that fact and their own quarrel into consideration his willingness now to be of service did him credit. Altogether it was a situation in which the less said the better.

After two hours he came to a stop and motioned to her to take the wheel. She had learned to drive her father's car only for pastime, and had always had a healthy respect for speed limits, but she proved to-day as furious a driver as her brother. And so they sped along the general route which Cal and Reed had taken a few weeks before. They were under no necessity of avoiding the towns and the principal roads, as Cal had

been, and by nightfall a third of the distance to Wheatview had been covered. They halted for supper and to stretch their limbs, and then pressed on again, one dozing while the other drove. So on through the night. The first grey of dawn found the girl at the wheel, her eyes straining into the darkness of a road which continually heaved up before her like a narrow causeway between infinite gulfs of night. Slowly the blackness faded into a receding curtain of grey; suddenly the dawn blazed forth overhead, and a new day was born. The vague shadows of the plains took definite shape; the windows of the farmhouses far ahead, caught in the first rays of the rising sun, flashed their red heliograms against the scattering banks of darkness to the west. The light fell on prairie ponds, silent and clear as quicksilver; it sparkled on jewels of dew on a billion blades of grass; it strung itself in thin golden ribbons along the telephone wires that stretched forever ahead. Up from the distance came a mighty railway train, pouring mountains of billowing smoke into the still air; the engine, at first a diamond point where the sun's beams focussed in its headlight, grew rapidly black and terrific as it approached; then it rushed by, its drive-wheels racing and the steel rails twanging underneath. The engineer saw the girl at the wheel and waved her a salute as they passed, and Minnie waved back, and of a sudden knew once more that life is worth the living. In an intoxication of speed she fled through a sleeping hamlet and again up an eternity of road which narrowed to a point and faded out of view on the edge of the sky.

At four in the afternoon they were nosing along the main street of Wheatview, watching for the sign on a doctor's office. Doctor Thompson, as usual, was not at home, and his wife, a busy woman, was engaged

at the telephone when they entered. When she had hung up the receiver she turned to them.

"Cal Beach? Oh, yes, the doctor spoke of him. Has a little boy down with typhoid. Yes, the doctor was out to see him again this morning. He seems to be holding his own. The doctor says Mr. Beach is a wonderful man; never saw the like, without a woman in the house. You'll be friends of his?"

"Well, yes," Minnie explained. "That is, we—we're acquaintances, and we're—very fond—of the boy, too, and we came to see if we could help."

From Mrs. Thompson they learned the road to the Mason homestead, and the girl gained a few suggestions concerning the care of the patient. Ten minutes later they were again on their way.

Cal Beach had set up a tub on the shady side of the shack and was busy with his hospital washing when an automobile turned from the main road and bore quickly down upon him. Engaged in his operations, he did not hear its approach until it drew up alongside. Then, for a moment, he distrusted his eyes, but slowly and surely the dust-begrimed figures in the car resolved themselves into Jackson and Minnie Stake!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MINNIE was first out of the car. She came toward him with outstretched hand.

"You see, Cal, I have come. I came immediately I received your telegram. We thought we could make better time by car, so Jackson drove me. How is Reed?"

With a grain sack tied about his waist for an apron, his sleeves tucked above his elbows, and a wet sheet still clasped in his hands, Cal had a sense that his appearance did him rather less than justice. Even in the embarrassment of this unexpected meeting he was conscious of that. He was conscious, too, of Minnie's eyes on his face, searchingly; of a tremor in her voice which she had been unable to quite conceal. Her untamed loveliness held and thrilled him even through the chill of the sinister presence of Jackson Stake, and a pang of poignant sympathy clutched his heart. Why had *she* come? Not that he would have sent her back, for worlds, but—it was going to be increasingly difficult for them. And Jackson— The words, "But I didn't wire for you—it was your mother!" sprang to his lips, but he had presence of mind enough to swallow them unsaid. Indeed, he swallowed a second time before he spoke.

"This is good of you, Minnie; better than I deserve," he said, as he took her hand. "You, too, Jackson. Better than I deserve. Yes, I think Reed is holding his own. Doctor Thompson was here this morning—"

"We called at his office in town," Minnie hurried to say. She felt that she must say something to relieve the tumultuousness uprising within her. Though her lips uttered words, it was her eyes that were eloquent. So this was Cal—Cal. She had an impulse to seize him in her arms, to draw his face to hers, to hold him as she had held him that night so long ago. But with the same impulse came the recollection of the cruelty with which he had treated her, the contumely which he had left her to bear alone. By an access of resolution she set her face; her shoulders stiffened with pride. She told herself she had come for a purpose, but her hour was not yet.

"Take me to him," she said, hurriedly, turning away.

Cal led her into the house. On the bed in the corner, no longer a rumple of grey blankets, but white in new cotton sheets, lay Reed. His eyes were closed; he seemed in a sort of stupor as she approached and stood for a long minute looking down upon him in silence. Then, seeming to sense her presence, he slowly turned his face toward her.

"Grandma?" he breathed, in a hardly audible whisper.

She sank on her knees beside him; reached out, caressed his hair with her fingers.

"No, dear, this is not Grandma. This is Minnie. Do you remember me—Minnie?"

Slowly his eyes opened, and he held her in his big wondering gaze. "I wanted Grandma," he said.

"He has talked so much of your mother—he calls her Grandma," Cal explained. "I have comforted him by saying that Grandma was coming."

"I shall be Grandma to you," Minnie whispered. "I have come to help make you well."

"I—wanted—Grandma," he said.

Presently he dropped back into his stupor of sleep, and the girl rose from his side. When she stood she was close to Cal, and again she felt his presence overpowering her. Inwardly she chided herself. "Have sense, Minnie; have sense. Must he humiliate you again?"

Outwardly, "I suppose I am to be nurse. I don't know much about it. You'll have to tell me, Cal."

She had not intended to use his name, but it slipped out unawares. . . . Besides, it was good to note how he seemed to clutch at the familiar address.

"You'll be all right, Minnie; I know you'll be all right. You don't know what a load— I feel as though Reed were on the mend already. Just take charge, and I will be your willing slave."

"I'm following a good housekeeper," she said, with a swift glance about the little room, in which Cal had established an order and cleanliness unimaginable in the régime of Mr. Mason. "I suppose you've been doing here—what you did at Plainville. You know—the water trough, and the pig pen, and all that sort of thing?"

"And Beach Boulevard?" he added, almost gaily. In spite of Reed's sickness, in spite of the sudden cloud of Jackson Stake's presence, his heart insisted upon singing from very joy in her nearness.

"Yes, and Beach Boulevard," she repeated, disregarding the little danger signals which, from somewhere in her consciousness, were flaring warnings that this was not the course to which she had set herself. For the first time her lips had parted in a smile.

"It's good to see you again, dear," Cal whispered. "It was splendid of you to come. I was afraid, after what had happened—after what I had done—"

"Let's not talk about that," she interrupted, firmly.

"I came because Reed was very sick. I wouldn't have come, otherwise."

When the words were out she wondered if they were quite true, but it was then too late to recall them. Cal was suddenly sobered. "I understand," he said, but the fire was gone from his voice. "It was tremendously good of you to come, and I shall not presume upon your kindness. I shall treat you just as professionally as—as you make me."

The girl was trembling under the tension of her restraint. As professionally as she made him! She wondered how long that would last—how long she could make it last. For the resentment she had told herself she harbored was melting away in the glow of Cal's presence like a snowball in the sun. There *must* be a reason, a sufficient reason, which he would tell her in good time. Had not his telegram promised an explanation? In good time—

Jackson, who had been examining the car after its long run, appeared in the doorway. His eyes took in the contents of the room; Cal and Minnie standing in the spot of clear space in the centre of the floor; the bed, with its little occupant, silent in a corner. Without speaking he crossed over to the bed, running, as if by some impulsive instinct, his fingers through his hair as he went. It was his father's gesture.

For a minute or two he stood looking down in silence.

"Is he pretty sick, Cal?" he asked.

"Pretty sick."

To smother thoughts that were running wild within her Minnie pounced into activity. "Bring my things, Jackson," she commanded. "Can I change here?"

"It's the only place we have," said Cal. "One room, and all outside." He went with Jackson, and when

they had handed Minnie her suitcase the two men strolled toward the car. For a moment they regarded each other without speaking.

Cal was the one to break the silence. "You have me at a loss, Jackson," he said. "It was certainly very good of you to drive from Plainville, but I'm puzzled about your motives. I can't forget the circumstances under which I left there. All this has come out of your—of what you threatened—and I think I can fairly blame you for it."

"Oh, that's all right," said Jackson, with a laugh in which there was no joyousness. "I thrive on blame. Pile it on as thick as you like. When the world gets down on a man a little more doesn't matter."

This was hardly the tack which Cal had expected, and it made his moves no clearer to him. Jackson was unprincipled, he knew, and perhaps dangerous; whether the man had also his human side Cal had not so far discovered. He recalled that Minnie had once said something about Jackson feeling that all the world was at war with him. Certainly he, Cal, had been at war with Jackson; for years before they had met in the flesh that state of war had existed. He had declared war on Jackson by the bedside of his sister Celesta; the wild beast within him had sprung up and cried, "When I meet this man I will tear him limb from limb." . . . And now he stood, regarding him across the dusty fender of the car, and in some way failed to realize that this was in very fact the man. It seemed as though in some vicarious experience he had already settled the score with Jackson Stake. It seemed as though, in a sort of world of the mind and, perhaps, of the spirit, he had exacted retribution. The fact was, his hatred of the man had dissolved. He was amazed and somewhat annoyed at this phenomenon,

but it was so. He did not hate this man who stood within arm's reach across the fender. He despised him, but he did not hate.

"I don't want to 'pile it on,' " he said at length. "I want to be fair. But I must know why you are here. I was ready to kill you a few weeks ago; kill you, you understand? It seemed the only way out. That was why I ran away from Plainville; I didn't run away from you—don't imagine it—I ran away from myself."

He was astonished that he should so uncover his heart to this man whom he despised, but the words flowed forth, and as they flowed they brought relief. Whatever the cause or the process, it was plain that he had gone through some kind of transformation. His attitude toward Jackson had changed. Even his contempt began to have a measure of compassion in it. Perhaps it was Reed's sickness; he could find no other explanation than that Reed's sickness must have established some subtle bond—some psychological bond, perhaps—between them.

"I didn't run away from you, Jackson," he repeated, as though it were of particular importance that he should establish that fact. "Don't get any wrong idea about that. I ran away from myself."

Jackson answered with his mirthless laugh. "It can't be done," he said. "I've been trying it for ten years, and I know."

There was another gap of silence which Cal bridged at length, impatiently. "Well, what's the answer, Jackson? Why are you here, and is it to be peace or war?"

Jackson toyed with the steering wheel, and gave the horn a little reassuring toot, before he spoke. "That's hard to say," he began. "So much depends on cir-

cumstances. I don't mind telling you that when I put up my little scheme at Plainville it wasn't so much to get money out of you—although I never pass up any easy coin—as to keep you quiet. As soon as I saw how the land lay I figured that one of us was going to be in the hole, and it was a good time to strike first. Of course—"

"I never would have known," Cal interrupted. "I never would have suspected you—the thought would never have come into my mind—if you hadn't let me know."

"Well, perhaps. Perhaps it was the money I wanted. I'm not saying but I may want it yet. At any rate it seemed a good place to strike first. I'm sorry you thought of killing me, though. That would have made so much unpleasant talk."

"Not the way I proposed to do it," said Cal, grimly. "And as you haven't quite given over your plans, I won't say I've entirely abandoned mine. They'll keep. Now—why are you here?"

"A number of reasons. Does it occur to you that I may be concerned about the boy's illness?"

"No, I confess it doesn't. Your concern about his welfare so far does not lend itself to any such suggestion. Try again."

"Then, Minnie wanted to come, on Reed's account. Of course she couldn't stay with you here alone. You had thought of that?"

"I can't say I had. Your sister is here in the capacity of a nurse, professionally. Nothing wrong about that."

"Minnie's not a nurse, and she's not here professionally. Do you think she came for what you'll pay her?" Jackson laughed sardonically. "For what *you'll* pay her—you who couldn't spare the price of a

railway ticket to keep out of this mess? No, Minnie didn't come here for a fee. She left a better job than you can offer her. She tried to tell me she was coming on Reed's account. I know better. That's the reason—one of the reasons—I'm here."

Cal's anger was rising again under Jackson's cool affrontery, but mixed with the anger was a curious happiness over this testimony concerning Minnie's motives. It was good to have her come as Reed's nurse, but it was better— Still, the hypocrisy of this man nauseated him.

"So you have become a champion of women's virtue," he said, bitterly. "I can only regret that you were less gallant when it was *my* sister that was concerned."

Jackson rolled a cigarette with much deliberation. "That's a common fault among men," he observed. "You may have noticed it. You may even have experienced it."

The thrust in the dark struck Cal deeper than he would have cared to admit, but at that moment their discussion was cut short by Minnie's appearing at the door. She had changed to a neat house dress of some inexpensive stuff which, although not a nurse's uniform, gave her a kind of professional note. The smart simplicity of her costume struck Cal as tremendously domestic and homey. For the moment Jackson was out of his mind as he turned to introduce her to his scanty housekeeping equipment.

"I think I'm the only one that can make these dishes go 'round, Minnie," he explained. "It takes a bit of education—"

"A D. D.," she interrupted, and immediately stiffened again. Why must something within her be so

absurdly facetious while she was trying to impress this man with a sense of her disfavor?

"Yes, a D. D.," he agreed, shamelessly unimpressed. "It helps. So I shall continue the kitchen duties. You will need all your time for Reed."

Was he seeking an excuse to be with her in the house? "Oh, I think I can manage both," she said. "I'm sure I can. Besides, how about the farm? There must be work—haying or something—to do, isn't there?"

"There's a bit more haying," he admitted. "I had forgotten about it. I think these last days I have forgotten everything, except Reed—and you."

"Of course you've been worried about Reed," she parried. "Now, do you know what I've been wondering? How we're to manage at nights."

It was a problem in house planning, and they settled it together. Reed, of course, must be undisturbed. They would make down a bed on the floor for Minnie, and Cal would sleep in the old Ford drawn up near the window, where he would be available quickly in case of emergency. Jackson must be intrusted to the hospitality of the stables.

As the evening wore on it occurred to Cal that Minnie must be tired after her long journey. He himself, although he had not slept since Reed had taken sick, felt little weariness. He was drawing on his reserves, but that was what reserves were for.

"Better go to bed, Minnie," he suggested. "You need a good sleep, and I'll sit up with Reed tonight. If he's troublesome I'll wake you."

The girl protested, but, fearing that refusal might be misconstrued, she let him have his way. While she made her preparations Cal explained the arrangements to Jackson. "You can sleep in the Ford tonight if you

like," he said, "but afterwards I can't offer you anything better than a stall in the stable. It will be warm, and there's plenty of clean hay, but it's not a good point from which—from which to chaperone us."

Jackson's dark face twisted in its enigmatical smile. "I'll take a chance," he said.

When Minnie had gone to bed Cal entered and took his post. Reed still lay in a partial stupor and gave little trouble save by his occasional demands for water. Cal had set a lamp burning low, in case it should be needed for sudden service, and presently Minnie's steady breathing proclaimed that she had fallen asleep. For the comfort of his eyes Cal took a seat by Reed's bedside, with his back to the lamp, and turned over in his mind the strange happenings of the day. The panic which had seized him upon Reed's illness had swept by and had left him strangely calm and assured. For Reed the worst was over; in some way he felt assured of that. Dr. Thompson had said the fever would have to run its course, and it was mainly a matter of proper care. Minnie, although not a nurse, was a girl of sense, and she could be trusted. What a topsy-turvy world it was! And who more topsy-turvy in it than Cal himself? As he ran back in his mind over the experiences of the recent weeks he found it impossible to realize that he was the same man who had deliberately planned the death of Jackson Stake; who had even regarded those plans as a virtuous thing, and the only solution of his difficulty. It had all seemed so sane and reasonable. Tonight he knew he had been stark mad. Yet no one had suspected him; not even Jackson. . . .

That was the thing that impressed him most, and the more he thought of it the more was he impressed. No one had sensed the brooding tragedy. The sleepy,

good-humored, narrow-bounded life of which the Stake farmstead was the centre had seen in him only an innocuous and somewhat amusing atom of intelligencia—Cal was thinking in his own language—it had not suspected the social dynamite under his Saturnian exterior. The mental processes through which he had passed suggested hubbub and screaming headlines as a proper accompaniment; as a matter of fact, they had not stirred by a feather's breath the placidity of that prairie settlement. How little even the simplest social system knew of the hidden actions and reactions, the conflicts, the intrigues, the tragedies gestating unsuspected in its apparently limpid shallows! With all its eavesdropping, its gossip-mongering, how little the community really knew! He wondered how many men go about with madness in their hearts, some, like himself, to be saved by a fortunate twist of fate, others to challenge the horror of that organized society of which they form a part. Did any man really understand any other man? Did any man really understand himself?

What about Jackson Stake? Why had he followed, and what were his purposes? Was he, too, mad? Had it been in madness—a different kind of madness—that he had sinned against Celesta? Was Jackson Stake any worse than he? Or was he? Was it all part of the mystery of life, confused, baffling, unanswerable? And why had he forgiven Jackson Stake? In his heart he knew he had forgiven him; that he no longer craved vengeance, but only to be let alone. Had there been some kind of atonement in those days and nights of mental distortion out of which he had come purified, seeing clearly at last? He, who had studied human life in books, found the book of life itself an unanswerable riddle.

As the night wore on a strange peace took possession of his soul. He was surprised when he became conscious of it. It stole in upon him so unobtrusively that he scarce noticed its coming, until suddenly he realized how strangely it enveloped him. There was a sense of possession, a sense of well-being, a sense of destiny fulfilled. Slowly it dawned upon him that this was the vision he had carried in his heart; these two, here, almost within reach of his hand—they were all in the world that really mattered. With a sudden leap of intuition he knew what it was. They were *his family!* His family! That without which no life is complete; that about which all life centres and revolves. One's wife; one's family! And they were here—here within touch of his hand!

To steady his thought he slipped quietly into the cool air outside. The night was dark; no stars blinked overhead, but a breeze soughed up through the valley and lisped eerily across the fields of wheat. He filled his lungs with great satisfying breaths and clutched again at the thought which had brought him happiness. It was of Minnie as his wife, and Reed as their boy.

Then, upon his great happiness, darkness came down again. The serenity which he had so briefly tasted was suddenly roiled, and under the quiet skies he sought to win it back. But it had flown him. Like the tip of some enchanted wing, it had rested on his shoulder for a moment before its flight into the void from which it had come had left him more deserted than before. For a great fear had suddenly seized him. Could he marry this girl without telling her? And if he told her, what?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IT WAS not that Cal feared that knowledge on Minnie's part would lower him, or Reed, in her estimation; he was sure he knew the girl too well for that. His danger was a much deeper and more difficult one. If Minnie knew the truth would not she be so crushed by humiliation as to think herself forever his inferior? Would she be willing to marry one who had been shamelessly wronged by a member of her family? Could there be equality or self-respect on such a basis? And without self-respect what hope could there be for love?

This was the problem which so suddenly seized him, and to which the soughing winds, the lisping wheat-leaves, gave no answer. Through the gloom the farm stables bulked vaguely in a darker greyness. Under their roofs somewhere lay Jackson Stake, now more completely in Cal's power than ever he had dreamed. Some slumbering fang of that hate which he had thought dead cut suddenly into his heart. Hate the man—how could he other than hate him? . . . A careless match dropped in the hay by the stables, with the lock set on the door. . . . It would be simple enough. The horses were in the pasture. Jackson, lighting a cigarette, had fired the hay about him and had been cremated in his own holocaust. That would be the explanation. Horribly simple. . . .

Presently Cal fancied he heard a sound distinct from the vague night noises that filled the air. He was

standing in the shadow, a little way from the wedge of light that fell through the open door, when he heard it, and in an instant his senses were strung taut. . . . He was sure he heard a stealthy footfall in the grass. Noiselessly he drew into the deeper gloom, finding the wall of the shanty with his hand, then moving slowly, silently, along it to the corner. As he neared the corner he could distinguish the faint light which fell through the window in the northern end of the house, the end in which Reed's bed was set. But the square of light was not quite square; a roundish shadow, such as might be caused by a man's head, cut off a corner of it.

For a moment he hesitated. It was plain that some one was looking through the window, obviously with no good purpose, or why did he not come to the door? The advantage of a surprise attack would be all with Cal, and he tensed himself for the emergency. Then, stealthily, he extended his head until he could see along the northern wall.

Jackson Stake knelt by the window, crouched so that only the upper part of his head and face was in the light. He was gazing intently, absorbedly at the little form on the bed. . . . It would have been so easy to overpower him in that position. Perhaps it was the very ease of it that deterred Cal from rushing upon him.

"Well, Jackson, what do you want?" he demanded sharply, stepping up beside him. "Eavesdropping—or just chaperoning?"

Jackson turned a strangely drawn face to his, then slowly rose to his feet.

"You had the drop on me, Cal," he said. "I thought you were sitting back in the corner, where I couldn't see you. I was watching Reed."

"You seem very interested in Reed. Why didn't you come inside, if you wanted to, instead of sneaking up to the window?"

Jackson was silent for a moment, then suddenly broke out: "Oh, hell, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," and disappeared toward the stables.

When Dr. Armstrong called next day he took in the situation appraisingly. It was apparent that, short of a trained nurse, Minnie very nearly came up to his requirements.

"Sharp girl, that," he told Cal, as they talked together beside the doctor's car for a few minutes before he left. "Doesn't know much about nursing, but she's got savvy, you understand; she'll do as she's told. Knows the importance of exactness, or I'm mistaken. Stenographer, I think she said?"

"Yes, in a lawyer's office, but brought up on the farm."

"That accounts for it," said Dr. Armstrong, as though there had been something which needed to be accounted for. "One training gave her brains and the other exactness—care as to details, you know. Sharp girl. Don't see any reason why the boy shouldn't be all right, now; it will have to run its course, but he should be all right, provided she does exactly as she's told. You'll have to see to that, but I don't think you'll have any trouble."

The busy doctor finished his words as he changed his gears, and a moment later was trailing a cloud of dust toward the Wheatview road. It was the most encouraging report he had made since Reed's illness had begun.

The days of that illness passed slowly and uneventfully, fading into each other as in a period of dream. Cal was able to resume his haying, and, although his

relationships with Jackson were those of an armed truce, they were at no time near the breaking point. Jackson even worked with him in the hay field, and sometimes, during the evening, would spend an hour or two at Reed's bedside. Minnie carried on the work of housekeeper energetically and efficiently, but after that first meeting with Cal she had become absorbed in her patient and had displayed no further evidence of sentiment. Cal was obliged to admit that, whatever Minnie may have thought or felt—and Jackson's frank statement about her purpose in coming left little doubt in his mind—she had herself well under control. She worked early and late, and consulted him only as she might have consulted Mr. Bradshaw or Mr. Tonnerfeldt.

As the boy's fever continued to run its course normally and Cal's anxiety in that connection subsided, he felt himself more and more disposed to reopen negotiations with Minnie. The studied correctness of her behavior tantalized and intrigued him. It was hard to realize that this was the Minnie Stake of the granary episode. The thought occurred to him that perhaps she was playing a part; perhaps she was over-conscious of the observant eyes of her brother.

An opportunity to put her to the test came one day when Jackson volunteered to drive to Wheatview for supplies. Cal left the field at four o'clock and a little later met Minnie at the door of the house.

"You're in early, Cal," she observed. "Anything wrong in the fields?"

"No—nothing. But the work isn't pressing, and the day is hot, so I thought I'd knock off. How's the patient?"

"Doing well, I think. He's sleeping now, but he's been asking for Grandma and Trixie. I think he

knows who I am, too, but he doesn't seem to get interested in me."

"That's strange. His mind can't be quite normal, yet."

"Out of bounds, Cal. Can't I make you understand that I'm here to nurse Reed, and it isn't quite the thing for you—for you—"

"What isn't?"

"For you to say, or suggest, compliments to me, you know."

"Don't you like compliments, Minnie?"

"That's not the question."

"Don't you like my compliments, Minnie?"

They had seated themselves on a bench on the shady side of the house, and his eyes were on her face, but she avoided his gaze. He became aware that Minnie had grown thinner and paler; long hours and broken sleep were telling upon her, and he found himself seized in a great wave of sympathy. They had been so near, and it was intolerable now that they should be so far apart. With difficulty he restrained an impulse to take her in his arms, to draw her lips to his, but he warned himself that he must take no advantage of her position. Still, the present situation was intolerable. They must reach some kind of understanding.

"Don't you like my compliments—any more?" he repeated.

Her eyes lay on the distant wheat fields, now copper-red for harvest. Even as he beheld her Cal found himself comparing her waves of bronze-brown hair with those ripening fields. She was bewitching to look upon. "More than the fields is ripening," said he to himself.

"If you must know—no," she said. "Oh, Cal, can't you see how absurd this is?"

"Is it absurd, dear? When did it become absurd? Do you want to take back all—take everything back?"

The color mantled quickly in her pale cheeks, but she ignored the latter part of his question. "It became absurd when you ran away," she said.

"When I—ran away! But I didn't run away; not really. Oh, Minnie, I can't explain. You must believe that I didn't run away; not really, from you, do you understand?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. More than that, I'm afraid I can't. We parted as"—she trembled, hesitated— "as we parted. The next I knew you had disappeared. There were some strange stories about it. I can't repeat them, Cal; I can't. But they hurt me awfully."

She had drawn her hands up about her breast, and held herself as in physical pain. "They hurt me awfully," she murmured.

"But you knew they weren't true," he protested. "You knew that."

"I knew—some of them—weren't true," she faltered.

"And then you stayed away, and sent no word, no word at all," she went on. "How I watched the morning mails! Every day I would say to myself, 'Today I will hear from Cal. Today he will explain.' But no explanation came. People would look at me on the streets—I could see it in their eyes, I could hear them saying, 'That's her; you know, the one the hired man had to skip out about—' "

"Minnie!"

"That's what they were saying—and worse. And you let me stand it, alone, and not a word of explanation came from you; not a word."

Cal felt a great hollowness filling him. She was going to demand an explanation, the explanation he

never could give. If he did he would crush her forever; if he didn't—

"Then came your telegram," she went on. "The agent 'phoned it, and I didn't let them know at home that it wasn't for me. I wanted to come so that I might find out the truth. I told you I came on Reed's account. That wasn't true, Cal. I came on yours."

"I know it, Minnie," he whispered. "But why—"

"There was one clause in that telegram," she interrupted. "It said, 'I can explain everything.' I've been waiting for that explanation—I'm waiting for it now!"

She turned to him, her hands outstretched, imploring. "I don't take back anything, Cal," she pleaded. "I don't judge, I don't blame, I don't argue. I'm just waiting."

He would have taken her hands in his, but she withdrew them again, shaking her head slowly, solemnly. "I love you, Cal, now, just as I did—then. But I can't be played with. You must explain. Give me a reasonable explanation; it's only between we too, dear—I'll never breathe a word; it shall be buried in my heart forever. Only explain, so that I may know that there was an honest reason; even if—even if it's something you feel you *can't* explain, I think I'm big enough for that; only tell me, and all I have or am or ever can be is yours. Cal, have I offered you enough?"

His face had grown pale under the onslaught of her passion and with the horror of the unfathomable abyss on which he tottered. To tell her all would be so simple, so easy. For a moment the temptation seemed irresistible. What of the promise he had given Celesta? Must a man be bound forever by a promise given under such conditions, when the developments of the future could not be at all foreseen? What of Reed? She had given her pledge that the confession

would be buried in her heart. What of Minnie herself? . . . But even as he weighed these questions in his mind she took his silence for refusal. Her lovely body straightened before him; her head went back, her chin went up. She made a slight gesture of her hand as though dismissing him.

"Very well," she said, steadily. "I shall not humiliate myself again. I suppose it is hardly necessary to ask you to forget anything that may have occurred between us. I think I hear Reed," and, walking like a queen, she went into the house.

Cal watched her proud head until it disappeared beyond the doorway, and a surge of something like relief swept through him. For a moment he had wavered, but now was he master of himself again. Tell her? Never! Bow that head in shame; in shame for her brother, her family, herself, and in the bitterness of remorse for what had been and could not be undone? Never! He had lost her, but he had saved her; saved her for herself, but not for him. Pride, passion, pain, and a supreme glory of renunciation writhed in his heart together. But he had won; he knew that, once again, by the narrowest margin and a fortunate turn of fate, his better side had won. He, too, rose from the bench and with steady step took his way to the stables. . . . The thing now was for Reed to get well as quickly as possible. Minnie's presence, while she remained, would be a continual laceration to him, and he was fair enough to admit that, for her, the situation must be almost intolerable. The sooner it was ended the better.

The next evening Jackson sprung a surprise by offering to sit up with Reed. He and Cal were in the stable doing some evening chores when he broached the matter.

"You've been having it pretty steady, Cal," he said, as he leaned on his fork after filling a manger with hay. "If you don't mind I'll sit up with the boy tonight."

Cal looked at him doubtfully. His suspicions of Jackson, somewhat allayed by recent good behaviour, were again alert. There was something behind this suggestion; something more than appeared on the surface. Yet it was a request hard to refuse.

"If you don't mind, Cal, I'd like to sit up with him tonight," Jackson repeated.

"All right," he answered, shortly. "The crisis is past, and I guess he won't give you any trouble. That is, if Minnie agrees. You'll have to ask her."

Apparently Minnie agreed, for, as bed-time approached, Jackson took up his station in the house. Filled with misgivings Cal arranged his blankets in the old Ford. But he had no intention of going to sleep. Whatever Jackson's purpose might be he meant to be on hand in case there were evil plans to foil. As he drowsed in the Ford he recalled the night when he had surprised Jackson at the window, and along with that he began to link up strange incidents from time to time in the man's behaviour. Once, when Reed had called for a drink, Jackson had rushed with it before either Cal or Minnie could attend, and at different times he had seen him looking strangely at the boy. Reed had had a kite in the machine shed in which the binder sat, and one afternoon Jackson had spent hours studying its construction. He had even taken it out in an abortive attempt to make it fly. And he had surprised him again looking at an old coat of Reed's which hung on the stable wall as though the mystery of the universe were hidden in its folds. What to make of the man! Kidnapping, for the moment, was out of

the question. It would be murder. Could Jackson and Minnie have planned—

Suddenly a terrifying thought clamped his ribs like a vise. Would Jackson do the boy harm as he lay, sick and helpless, at his mercy? There were medicines there; an overdose might easily prove fatal. What had Jackson brought yesterday from town? He could easily have obtained—

In a panic of alarm he sprang from his cushions and rushed toward the house. He had not kept the Ford drawn up by the window since Reed's condition had improved; it stood back some little distance in the yard. In his excitement he tripped, apparently over nothing, and fell headlong in the grass. When he arose he was somewhat sobered, and he approached the window—the very one through which he had discovered Jackson peering—with caution.

The lamp in the house burned low; he could distinguish the outline of Minnie's bed in the far corner, and Reed's just under the window. For the moment Jackson was nowhere to be seen. The chair in front of the bed was empty; he was not by the stove; he was not by the door. But at length Cal began to make out the form of a man lying on the bed—on Reed's bed, close beside the boy. His first thought was that Jackson had lain down and fallen asleep, but as his eyes became accustomed to the light he saw that Jackson's hand was moving steadily, slowly, up and down, and his fingers were furrowing through the hair of the sleeping child. Fascinated, Cal watched as one who cannot believe the testimony of his eyes, but they would not be disputed. Certainly Jackson Stake was fondling the hair of the boy Reed, his child.

As one who has guiltily looked upon an intimacy not intended for his eyes Cal stole back to his cushions in a bewilderment of conflicting emotions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE NEXT day Cal drove the Ford to Wheatview for supplies. A sharp rainstorm in the afternoon delayed his return, with the result that it was dark by the time he arrived at the Mason farm. The lamp light shone through the window as he came up the drive from the road allowance, but the door was closed, for the night air was cool and damp.

Laden with parcels, Cal came to the door, wondering a little that Minnie had not opened it when she heard his car. Resting his load against the jamb, he turned the knob that he might walk in. He was about to call some cheery greeting when his eyes caught Minnie's form huddled by the little table, her face buried in her hands.

His first stab of alarm was for Reed. Had anything happened the boy? Dropping his parcels on a bench, he hurried to the bedside. But Reed was sleeping; his pulse was regular, his skin cool to the touch. Turning, he saw that the girl had not changed her position; her head was still buried in her hands, and as he looked a tremor ran through her form.

He hurried to her, arms outstretched. "What's the matter, Minnie?" What has happened? What is wrong?"

She did not answer, nor in any way seem to recognize his presence, but another tremor shook her frame, and Cal's hands fell about her shoulders. With Minnie in distress it was impossible for him to retain his

Platonism. His hands found her hair; his fingers caressed her ears, her cheeks. He bent down until his face was close to hers.

"Will you tell me what is wrong, Minnie?" he whispered, gently. "Perhaps I can help."

He waited for her answer, but it was a long while in coming. At last, in a voice from which every vestige of her spirit seemed to have been drained, she murmured, "How you must hate me! How you must hate me!"

"But I *don't* hate you, Minnie. I don't hate—I've never hated you—I couldn't hate you. Why do you say such a thing?"

She was silent now so long he thought she had decided not to speak to him again at all. But at length—

"Believe me, Cal, I would not be here except for Reed. I would have gone this afternoon. Anywhere—anywhere! I should never again have faced your eyes. I never—"

"But I don't understand! What are you talking about? Why shouldn't you face my eyes?" He hesitated, wondering. Suddenly the thought occurred to him that the strain and loneliness had been too much for her and her nerves had snapped under them. Slipping an arm about her, by sheer strength he raised her to her feet. Her body was limp in his arms. He turned her face to his, but her eyes were closed.

"Look at me, Minnie. Open your eyes, and look at me. See, I do not hate you; I love you—love you—love you." Coaxingly, almost crooningly, as to a child, he repeated the words in her ears, seeking to win her out of her mood; he raised her arms about his, but there was no answering pressure; his lips found hers, but they were flat and unresponsive as the lips of the

dead. So he held her for a long minute; then, puzzled and beaten, he let her rest again upon the chair.

"I wish you would tell me, Minnie," he ventured again. "I don't understand at all. You have been working too hard—the strain has been too much for you. Tomorrow you must go for a drive. Jackson can take you—"

At the mention of Jackson's name it seemed another shiver ran through her frame, and she murmured something which he could not catch. He bent his head beside hers, while with his fingers he caressed her hair, her temples, her eyes.

"I wish I might help you, Minnie," he whispered, his lips close to her ear. "I want to help you, because I love you, Minnie; love you, Minnie, do you understand?"

Suddenly she spoke. "Why do you say such untruths?" she demanded. "You don't love me! You *can't* love me! After what I—what we—what my family—"

She paused, and the tremor which ran through her frame seemed to communicate itself to Cal's. A paralyzing thought sent the hair of his neck creeping uncannily. What did she know? Could it be possible—?

"What do you mean, Minnie?" he demanded, with unintentional sternness. "What do you mean about you and your family?"

By a great effort she drew herself together, summoning all her fortitude for the task before her. She found herself able to speak more steadily. "Jackson has told me everything," she said. . . . "Now leave me, please."

As the words sank home upon him Cal began to

realize that they heralded an entirely new set of circumstances. The world of an hour ago was gone forever, and with these words he was ushered into a new planet, where a new Minnie Stake, sobered, shamed, abased, lay at his feet. Here again was a bruiséd reed, and one which, surely, he must not break. To win her back to pride in her family, in herself, must be the first step toward winning her back to love of him. It was a task big enough for all his resources of tact and earnestness.

Slowly the deadly effectiveness of Jackson's attack became clear to him. To tell Minnie was, after all, the surest way to raise an insurmountable barrier between them. The man's cunning and insight were diabolical.

"Where's Jackson?" he demanded. "Where's Jackson?"

"Gone," she answered. "I know what you're thinking, Cal, but I think you should know what he said. Before he left he held Reed in his arms and he said, 'Little boy, this is the hardest thing I ever did. I'm giving you to Cal and—and—"

"And what? . . . Minnie! Do you think he loved Reed?"

With the sound of her voice, the play of their conversation, her confidence came trickling back, her hysteria of dejection surrendering to calmer moods. Above its clamours of regret her heart incredulously heard again the tap of Hope upon its door; doors which, an hour ago, she had told herself, were closed and sealed forever. For Cal did not despise her! He loved her still—he said he did. Even if— She raised her eyes, deep wells of sudden sorrow and understanding, to his. Then,

"At the last, yes. It wasn't that that brought him

here. It was that wild, adventurous spirit of his. He felt that you had turned the trick on him, and he wanted to show you that he could turn it back. He wanted to show himself a match for you. I think that was what brought him. But sitting beside Reed, and watching him, and staying up with him at night, and wondering, and wondering. . . . 'Minnie,' he said, 'It got me. I began to realize things I'd never realized before. That he was my boy—' Cal, he couldn't say any more."

"And then he said he left him to me, and something else—you didn't finish it," Cal reminded her. "What else?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you, Cal."

He hesitated, prying about for a means of attack. Presently—

"Don't you think you *should* tell me, Minnie? Don't you think it's fair to deliver his whole message?"

"I suppose I should," she agreed. "But I am telling you for him, not for myself. He said, 'I'm giving you to Cal and—and—' " Her voice dropped to an almost inaudible sound. " 'And Minnie.' "

"And so it shall be," said Cal, raising her face again to his. "So it shall be. No one shall prevent it now; not even you. I shall win you back, you shall see. No matter at what cost." She shook her head gently, but she did not draw it away, and he held it still closer to his. "You shall see. I have known this all along, and it was no barrier to me. When your mind has become accustomed—has accepted it, it will be no barrier to you. Time may not heal all sores, but it surely brings us to understand. And when you see this sanely then you will—you will accept Jackson's gift."

So he plied her with caresses and assuring words un-

til at last with joy he knew the touch of her reviving love. . . .

"I shall give you time," he said. "All the time you want. But it must be that way in the end."

"I hope it may be so," she confessed. "Now I know why you couldn't explain. Jackson told me about his blackmail, too; I think he spared himself nothing. Oh, Cal, can you ever forgive?"

"That's the strangest thing about it," he told her. "I don't seem to have anything to forgive now. I seem to have lost it somewhere between Plainville and Mason's farm. It may be Annie Frawdic has it. I sometimes think it was Annie who took it from me. Perhaps it was she who helped me understand." And then he told her all about that last evening among the maples on Ernton's farm. That is, all she needed to know.

"But it wasn't you she left with, Cal?" she said, and he knew that the old fire was burning up again in Minnie's heart. . . .

"Where did Jackson go?" he asked again. "Did he take the car?"

"No. He didn't take anything. Said they travelled light the way he was going. Said he was going over to The Siding to jump the next freight. He said he was used to that kind of travel—he'd be all right—and I could tell you he wouldn't trouble you any more."

"I must follow him," said Cal. "We can't have him go like that."

Again he drew her, now responsive, to his arms, then, outside, he selected the Dodge for its better headlights and in a few minutes was on his way. The railway siding, where trains stopped at the water tank, and, in the shipping season, to pick up cars loaded with

wheat, lay four miles across the prairies from the Mason farm. Cal had never driven the trail, but he knew its general direction, and, once upon it, he followed it without difficulty. The rain had washed the winds clean, and as he drove he filled his lungs with great breaths of the evening air. In the far northwest a segment of light still hung along the horizon, while from the east came intermittently the faint blush of distant lightning. Very peaceful was the night, and as he hummed along the smooth prairie trail Cal found his heart grown strangely peaceful, too. The crisis was passed. Minnie knew. There would be no deception now, and yet he had remained faithful to Celesta, and to Reed. As for Jackson, he thought of him with a sort of detached impartiality. The idea of killing him, or even of hating him, was so absurd that he wondered how he ever could have entertained it.

Cresting a ridge on the prairies his vision caught the headlight of an engine standing at the water tank. Its long tail of freight cars was lost in the darkness; from far down the track came the glimmering green light of its caboose. Here was Jackson's opportunity; doubtless he would "jump" this train as it pulled out, and, crouched on the top of a box car, or standing over the coupling-bars, or hanging from the iron foot-rails, steal his ride until approaching daylight threatened his discovery. It would be no new experience for Jackson; he had simply swung back to that life from whence he came. Up in Cal's heart there suddenly welled a strange sense of sympathy with this man who felt himself a wanderer at war with all the world, and he speeded his car along the winding trail, the wet grass shining green against his headlights, to reach The Siding, if possible, before the freight pulled out.

But he was too late. As he hummed down the long

slope of prairie toward The Siding he heard above the music of his car the hoarse voice of the locomotive as with its first gasp it sent a shower of sparks scurrying amid a cloud of smoke and steam. Another, and another; a tempestuous roar as the drivers, impatient with the drag of their thousand-ton load, slipped on the rails; a steady, sober succession of accelerating exhausts as the great train got under way. Cal pulled so close to the track that the watchful engineer sent a screech of warning—two long blasts, two short—from his whistle. As the engine drew by Cal made out the form of the driver in his seat; the dim lights on the gauges beyond; the bent figure of the fireman delivering a shovelful of coal against the orange-white glow from the furnace. Overhead the trailing steam-cloud was lighted up with a momentary burst of lurid whiteness from the open fire-box. Then the cars swung by, clanking and jostling on their way, their brake-shoes droning loosely against the quickening wheels.

With a strange fascination Cal watched this dark, many-jointed, mechanical centipede roaring by, the car initials and numbers skipping with gathering speed through the white wedge of his headlights. Suddenly his eye seemed to catch the form of a man hanging by the hand-rails between two cars; he could not be sure, but the figure seemed to wave a shadowy hand at him as it flitted and was gone. . . . He watched while the green light on the caboose gave place to three red ones, and followed them with his eyes until they dimmed in a single orange blur in the distance. . . . Then he turned his car by the grain elevator, narrowly missing an empty gasoline drum in his orbit, and went slowly back to the shack on the Mason farm.

Jackson Stake had seen the headlights of the motor

as it emerged like a gigantic, electric-eyed bug over the edge of the prairie. He surmised that it was Cal in pursuit, probably in hostile pursuit, and smiled grimly as the clatter of the water-spout to place intimated that the engine was again ready for her journey. The clank of tightening draw-bars ran its gamut down the train like mighty fingers on a keyboard half a mile in length, and with the first motion of the wheels he drew himself up on the hand-rails between two cars. It was the old, free life again, and the singing of the rails was music in his ears. . . . As he raced by Cal he waved him a gesture, half of defiance, half of farewell.

The speed quickened; the cars swung more and more boisterously; the vacuum of their motion sucked dust and cinders from the roadbed to fill his throat and eyes, and in his heart was a happiness and sorrow such as he had never known. It was his first and great renunciation; and, having renounced so much, the thought insisted upon him, why not all? The price which remained to pay was not a heavy one. He had taken his life as a plaything and he had had his game with it. Now that the toy was wrecked, the bauble broken, why linger over the ruined fragments? And why regret? At best the pain outweighs the pleasure, the loss is always greater than the gain. Man lives not for today, but for tomorrow, and Hope, the arch deceiver, luring him on in the vain belief that somewhere, sometime, some tomorrow shall be better than today, mocks and deserts her victim at last and leaves him to the disintegration of the beast. That was the end. Jackson Stake's philosophy dared nothing further. And if that was the end, and the end was always the same, why prolong so profitless a journey?

Thoughts something like these may have run in his

mind as he clung to the hand-rails of the iron ladder on the end of his car. He had not known he loved the boy until contact had breathed to life the dead ashes of his parental instinct. Now, for the boy's sake, he must disappear forever. Grimly he told himself it was the only thing ever he had done that was worth doing; why not do it well?

A glint of light from the red rising moon fell on a segment of wheel within his vision and on the rail which streamed like a ribbon of steel beneath him. . . . To let go, that was all. To open his numbed and stiffening fingers. Only another bubble burst, another toy broken. . . .

Item from the Wheatview *Gazette*:

Section men working on the track east of The Siding Wednesday morning came upon the badly mangled remains of a man who had evidently been killed by a train during the night. There was nothing in the clothing that would lead to identification, and only a few cents of money, so it is supposed the remains are those of a tramp who had fallen from a train while stealing a ride. Coroner Armstrong held that an inquest was unnecessary, as it was plainly a case of accident.

As Cal read the cold type the words swam in his mind in a flood of possibilities. An accident? He recalled Jackson's remark, now strangely ominous and significant, "They travel light the way I'm going," and his head sank between his hands.

Then he destroyed the paper, that Minnie might never know.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

AGAIN it is June in Manitoba. Mantles of green are deepening on black fields now pregnant with another harvest, and from the summer-fallows slender spirals of dust twist heavenward like incense burned in worship of the god of husbandry. Upon the prairies, upon the groves, upon the gaudily painted buildings of Double F and Jackson Stake, the summer rests, calm and dazzling in its brilliancy. The world is at peace, and, it might be, asleep, save for the slow shuttling of the ploughs back and forth across the summer-fallows, and a voice which from time to time floats out of the distance—the voice of Gander Stake raised in admonition of a four-horse team long since indifferent to either his threats or blandishments.

On the surface of the lake, as calm and white as quicksilver, the blazing afternoon dips slowly into the mauve and purple and crimson of evening. High overhead tatters of cloud entrap their fringes of ruby light and fling them into the mirrored depths, where they reverse the blue bowl of infinity and set up a heaven of their own not less magnificent than that which gave them birth. . . . The lengthening shadows of the reeds creep out along the silent water; a fish leaps suddenly upon an incautious fly; a mother duck cajoles her brood like a phalanx of yellow tufted feathers in the soft ripples of her wake.

As the heat abates and the cool of evening enwraps the valley a little boy comes down to the shore to skip

stones on the water. With each skip of a stone the spaniel that gambols at his side plunges into the lake, to return, open- and empty-mouthed from a fruitless search for the occasion of the disturbance, but as eager as ever for another plunge the moment after. Above the noise of their play, from somewhere under the trees comes the incessant clatter of a typewriter, and up a leafy path, if we are now tempted to look, we may glimpse the outline, so hidden by foliage as to be almost undiscerned, of a bungalow of cottonwood logs, with a deep, inviting veranda and a chimney of granite boulders suggestive of hospitality, and rest, and the smell of wood smoke, and the glow of an open fire against the night winds from the lake.

"Thanks, Minn; that's a great help," said Cal, as the girl drew the last sheet from her machine. "If an author must marry, let him marry a stenographer. Tomorrow we'll hitch up Antelope and haul a load of manuscripts to town, and if we're lucky enough to find a cheque at the postoffice we'll visit the Roseland Emporium—"

"Or the Electric theatre," she suggested.

"Or the Electric theatre," he agreed. "Take along your broad hat, anyway. Now I have just time to catch a fish for supper—"

"Just the same, I shall fry sausages. I am beginning to know something of your fisherman's luck."

"Can't be lucky in everything," he smiled back, "and I've had my share. Here's your pay."

He paid her, and Big Jim, who was cropping grass near by, like the gentleman he was, turned modestly away.

After supper they fished until sundown, that they might have a string to present to Mrs. Goode and Mr. Bradshaw, when they met them in Plainville on the

morrow. Then they built a fire on the beach, and Reed demanded his bedtime story.

"Once upon a time," said Cal, when all three had snuggled into the sand beside the fire, "a beautiful rose grew in a field of wheat. She was very young and very sweet, and she loved the wheat, and the wheat loved her. In the darkness of the night, when the wind stirred above them, their leaves would rustle together. When the storms came, and the rain beat down upon them, the stalwart wheat protected her. He could not bear to see harm come to a petal of her wonderful face, but he loved to see the dew-drops hanging there when the sun burst over the clouds in the morning. On other nights, when all was still and calm, they stood together watching the friendly twinkle of the myriad of stars which God had set over them, and knew that in some way life was more than just being a rose and a stalk of wheat.

"And then, one night, a dreadful thing happened. A horrible weed grew up between them. He grew so fast that by morning he had quite shut them off from each other's view; the wheat could still scent the sweet perfume of the rose, and the rose could hear the sorrowful rustle of the wheat, but they were as far apart as though worlds had come between them.

"Then the wheat began to say to himself, 'I am stronger than this weed. Tomorrow night, when all is dark, I will uproot him and cast him out of the way; then he will shrivel up and die, and come no more between the rose and me.' But as he nursed this plan in his heart he looked down and saw that if he destroyed the weed he would surely uproot the rose. So the wheat was very sad, and for many days he made no cheerful sound at all. But at length he said, 'I love the rose even more than I love myself, and I will not

uproot the weed, but will let it grow up between us undisturbed, in order that not so much as a leaf of the beautiful rose may fall to the ground.' And after that he began to be happy again."

Minnie stirred where she sat, and Cal felt the pressure of her hand in his.

"All right. Go on, Daddy X," said Reed.

"And then another strange thing happened. A tiny flower sprang up from the very root of the weed. It was not a rose, and it was not wheat, but it was very tender, and delicate, and trustful. At first the weed paid no attention to this new flower, but after a while he began to love the little tendrils wrapped about him, so that he soothed and fondled it and grew very much attached to it. And one night he said suddenly, 'I am shutting the sunlight from this little flower which I love.' And in the morning he was gone, and was never seen again.

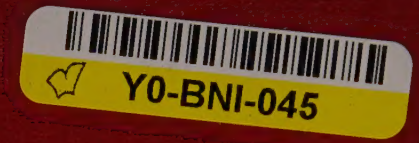
"After that the wheat and the rose and the little flower grew up very happily together. But the wheat and the rose often thought, with a strange sort of sadness, of the weed that had once grown up between them, and had gone away, because he loved the little flower."

The voice died out, and the speaker's eyes, and the girl's gazed mistily across the dull phosphorescent distances of the lake.

"Is that all?" said Reed. "It's a nice story, but I don't understand it."

"*I* do," the girl whispered, as she kissed her husband's lips.

THE END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